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SHORT STORY COLLECTION

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MORE
E. K. MEANS

Is this a title? It is not. It is the name of a writer of negro stories, who has made himself so completely the writer of negro stories that this second book, like the first, needs no title.

ILLUSTRATED BY
KEMBLE

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS
NEW YORK AND LONDON
The Knickerbocker Press
1919

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The Knickerbocker Press, New York

Foreword.

THE stories in this volume were written simply because of my interest in the stories themselves and because of a whimsical fondness for the people of that Race to whom God has given two supreme gifts,—Music and Laughter.

For the benefit of the curious, I may say that many of the incidents in these tales are true and many of the characters and places mentioned actually exist.

The Hen-Scratch saloon derived its name from the fact that many of its colored habitués played "craps" on the ground under the chinaberry trees until the soil was marked by their scratching finger-nails like a chicken-yard. The name Tickfall is fictitious, but the locality will be easily recognized by the true names of the negro settlements, Dirty-Six, Hell's-Half-Acre, Shiny, Tinrow,—lying in the sand around that rich and aristocratic little town like pigs around their dam and drawing their sustenance therefrom.

Skeeter Butts's real name is Perique. Perique is also the name of Louisiana's famous home-grown tobacco, and as Skeeter is too diminutive to be named after a whole cigar, his white friends

have always called him Butts. Vinegar Atts is a well-known colored preacher of north Louisiana, whose "swing-tail prancin'-albert coat" has been seen in many pulpits, and whose "stove-pipe, preachin' hat" has been the target of many a stone thrown from a mischievous white boy's hand. Hitch Diamond is known at every landing place on the Mississippi River as "Big Sandy."

When these tales were first published in the *All Story Weekly*, many readers declared that they were humorous. Nevertheless, I hold that a story containing dialect must necessarily have many depressing and melancholy features. But dialect does not consist of perverted pronunciations and phonetic orthography. True dialect is a picture in cold type of the manifold peculiarities of the mind and temperament. In its form, I have attempted to give merely a *flavor* of the negro dialect; but I have made a sincere attempt to preserve the essence of dialect by making these stories contain a true idea of the negro's shrewd observations, curious retorts, quaint comments, humorous philosophy, and his unique point of view on everything that comes to his attention.

The Folk Tales of Joel Chandler Harris are imperishable pictures of plantation life in the South before the Civil War and of the negro slave who echoed all his master's prejudice of caste and pride of family in the old times that are no more.

The negroes of this volume are the sons of the old slaves. Millions of them live to-day in the small Southern villages, and as these stories indi-

cate, many changes of character, mind, and temperament have taken place in the last half-century through the modifications of freedom and education.

This type also is passing. In a brief time, the negro who lives in these pages will be a memory, like Uncle Remus. "Ethiopia is stretching out her hands" after art, science, literature, and wealth, and when the sable sons of laughter and song grasp these treasures, all that remains of the Southern village negro of to-day will be a few faint sketches in Fiction's beautiful temple of dreams.

E. K. Means.

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Diada, Daughter of Discord

I

A BRAND FROM THE BURNING

DIADA was a sight.

She stood on the Gaitskill lawn motionless as a brown wooden statue, gazing like a homesick child toward the purple haze which hung over the Little Moccasin Swamp. Her hips bulged out behind like a bustle; her stomach protruded in front like the chest-protector of a fat baseball-catcher; her back curved above her hips and bent at her shoulders, giving her the appearance of a hunchback; and as for her face—well, the children of Tickfall took one look at that mug and hiked for home, howling at every step; the pious took a look and crossed themselves; the ungodly "cussed"; and it is rumored that some negroes turned white.

Every feature of that face was a horror.

Her head was covered with a mat of coarse hair growing down on a sloping forehead almost to her eyebrows; her eyes were immensely large and protruding, and had the wolf's vicious glint and surly shifting

glance; her nose was no longer adorned, according to the custom of her native land, by having long thorns and splinters of bone thrust through it, but it had suffered grievously from this devotion to fashion, and was now a battered daub of a snout which looked as though it had been run through a sausage-grinder before it was smeared on her face; her ears had been so deformed by carrying heavy iron rings that the lobes hung down nearly to her shoulders and flapped at every motion of her head like the loose-hung ears of the hound; and her mouth was a cavernous monstrosity—great, horrid, horselike teeth protruding outward, and covered with thick, repulsive lips which curled back when she spoke or grinned until the blue gums of the upper teeth were revealed.

Colonel Tom Gaitskill was among the ungodly who gazed upon this horrific vision with profane utterance. He turned to the tall, weather-tanned man who sat beside him on the porch and spoke:

"Lem, I have known you and loved you for thirty years. I have applauded most of the things you have done. But it is now my solemn duty to inform you that you are a d—— fool!"

Captain Lemuel Manse broke into a loud laugh. He looked at Diada and laughed again; then he looked at Gaitskill's horrified countenance and laughed louder.

"I'm afraid you have none of the spirit of the Christian missionary, Tom," Manse finally managed to say.

"If the Christian missionaries in the Pacific Islands are engaged in saving the immortal souls of

she-baboons like that," Gaitskill snorted, pointing to Diada, "I'll never give 'em another cent—not a dang cent!"

"Diada was made in the image of God, Tom," Manse snickered.

"She may have been—*once!*" Gaitskill snapped. "But a hooliboogoo ran over her and mussed up that image considerably. When are you going home?"

"Why do you ask?" Captain Manse inquired.

"My eyes are getting sore looking at that heathen cannibal—that's why I ask," Gaitskill replied. "When are you going to take her away from here?"

"Tom," Manse said in a voice of mock sadness and reproof, "I'm surprised at you. It's been five years since I was a guest in your hospitable home, and in less than two hours after my arrival you inquire the time of my departure! Shame!"

"Keep your eye on that nigger!" Gaitskill said with a chuckle as he pointed to a giant black who came through a side gate into the lawn.

With the free stride of the athlete, Hitch Diamond, the immense, coal-black prize-fighter, came across the grass, his eyes following the winding galleries of the house, apparently in search of Mr. Gaitskill.

He came face to face with Diada before he noticed her; he gazed with popping eyeballs; his pugilistic courage and his giant strength oozed out at his boot-heels, and his iron jaw dropped down and wigwagged like the loose under lip of a plug horse sleeping in the sun.

"My Gawd!" he exclaimed.

4 Diada, Daughter of Discord

He slunk slowly backward until he got some thorny shrubbery between himself and Diada, and then his ponderous feet beat a wild tattoo of panicky retreat upon the sodded turf.

"There, now!" Gaitskill exclaimed. "Hitch Diamond has given an outward and visible manifestation of my inward and spiritual emotions. Look at the wench! She hasn't moved a muscle of her body for twenty minutes! Can't you get her to do something?"

"Sure!" Captain Manse answered, feeling in his pocket and bringing forth a ten-cent piece. "Have you got a dime in your pocket?"

Gaitskill produced the silver piece and held it out.

"No," Manse said, "I don't want to touch it. Throw your money out there in the grass!"

The two men tossed their coins out into the thick Bermuda grass, and Manse gave a sharp whistle.

Diada turned and trotted toward him like a dog.

"Hunt, Diada!" Manse exclaimed, pointing to the grass. "Hunt!"

Diada wheeled and made a wide circle around that part of the lawn; then traveling in a steady trot, she made ever narrowing circles, eyes searching the ground. Suddenly she stopped, picked up a silver dime, placed it to her nose, gave a snort of disgust, and tossed the coin aside.

"That was your money," Manse explained. "She'll find mine in a minute."

Even as he spoke, Diada pounced upon the silver piece and came trotting up to the porch and placed it in her master's hand.

"Ah, I see!" Gaitskill exclaimed comprehendingly. "I have spent my life hunting for my collar-buttons, shirt-studs, hat, and socks. So have you. So has every man. And you've brought this cannibal belle to this country with you to help you find yours!"

"No, Tom," Captain Manse laughed. "I bought Diada to save her life. My yacht stopped at one of those little islands in the Pacific Ocean which has about a thousand inhabitants—there's no end of such islands out there. The cannibal chief came on board with Diada and offered to sell her to me.

"He explained that he had captured her from a neighboring tribe and had intended to eat her. I bought her for about eleven dollars, paying for her in red calico, brass beads, and some tinware. The cannibal chief put one of the tin buckets on his head for a hat and rowed away as happy as an angel with a crown upon his forehead and a harp within his hand."

Manse broke off and emitted a sharp whistle. Diada came to him on a trot.

Manse caught her left hand, pushed back the loose sleeve of her white dress, and bared her arm.

Gaitskill shuddered.

Just below her elbow was the slowly healing scar of a most horrible wound.

"My stars!" Gaitskill exclaimed. "That wound looks like it had been made by teeth!"

"That's where the old chief bit her to see if she was good to eat," Manse explained. "He said she was too tough."

Gaitskill glanced at Diada's face. The vicious, surly glint was gone from her eyes, and she gazed with a mild, pleading look upon the man who had saved her—the look of the dumb animal which has suffered and shows gratitude for relief. Gaitskill underwent a change of heart. He rose to his feet and stood facing them both.

"Lem," he said, "if that cannibal chief had showed me that wound I would have bought Diada if she had cost me a thousand dollars."

"Certainly, Tom," Manse replied quietly. "There was nothing else for me to do."

Diada turned and walked back to the lawn, taking the same motionless posture, gazing out toward the purple haze of the Little Moccasin Swamp.

Gaitskill sat down, lit a cigar, and gave himself up to deep thought. Then he asked:

"Now that you've got her, Lem, what are you going to do with her?"

"I'm going to give her to you!" Lem said quietly.

"Wha-what?" Gaitskill barked, springing to his feet again. "Good gosh!"

"I'll have to do that, Tom," Manse said defensively. "This is the first time she has been on land since I bought her. Now, I'd like to leave her here with you all the time, but if you won't keep her——"

"I won't," Gaitskill snapped. "You can bet on it, I won't!"

"Well, keep her here for me for two weeks," Manse pleaded. "I've got to run up to St. Louis on some business, and when I come back, I'll take her away with me."

"That sounds easy," Gaitskill remarked. "Do you think Diada will stay with me?"

"Yes, if I tell her to."

"All right," Gaitskill assented. "I'll keep her. I'll turn her over to the care of the niggers and forget her—if I can. But I want you to give her all the instructions necessary for the next two weeks. I don't speak cannibal."

II

HITCH HAS VAGUE MISGIVINGS

When Captain Lemuel Manse and his wife had been whirled away in the Gaitskill automobile to the Tickfall landing where their yacht awaited them in the Mississippi River, Gaitskill sat down on the porch to think over his troubles.

Diada stood before him on the lawn, motionless and ugly as a heathen idol, her eyes still watching the purple haze above the swamp.

"Something over in that swamp has got to be hypnotized," Gaitskill muttered to himself as he watched her. "When she gets a little tame I'll take her for a trip to the hog-camp. I suppose she never saw anything but a cocoanut palm."

He leaned over the porch railing; looked back toward the rear of the house; cupped his hands around his mouth like a trumpet, and bellowed:

"Oh, Hitch! Come here! Hear me!"

"Yes, suh, white folks! Comin'! Comin' wid a looseness; comin' right now!"

Hitch came, but he chose a very unusual route—through the house. Arriving at the door which admitted him to the porch where Gaitskill sat, he stopped, peeped at Gaitskill, then peeped at Diada, and ducked back into the room.

"Come here, Hitch!" Gaitskill commanded.

"Excuse me, Marse Tom," Hitch muttered. "I's axin' you whut you wants?"

"Come out here! What in the name of mud is the matter with you?" Gaitskill bawled.

Hitch came out, his ponderous feet paddling along the floor like a lame duck, while his eyes never strayed from the broad, hunched back of Diada.

"'Scuse me, Marse Tom," Hitch pleaded. "Dat new she-queen you's hired to dec'rate dat lawn is done deprive me of my goat!"

"Don't be a fool, Hitch!" Gaitskill snapped, smothering a desire to laugh. "That nigger woman is Captain Lemuel Manse's house-servant. She'll be here with us two weeks. I want you and Hopey to treat her kindly and make her feel at home."

"Boss, is she gentle?" Hitch asked as if he were alluding to a newly purchased horse.

"Certainly," Gaitskill assured him. "What's the matter with you? Diada is just a nigger woman like Hopey."

"Mebbe so suh," Hitch mumbled. "But she shore don't look like Hopey in looks."

"Take her around to the kitchen and give her something to eat," Gaitskill commanded.

"Yes, suh," Hitch answered obediently, but his tone expressed the exact denial of his words, and he

stood right where he was. "Yes, suh; I'll fetch her aroun' to de kitchen—er, uh—atter while—soon's I kin git aroun' to it. Ole miss tole me to go down to de sto'house right now——"

"She told you nothing of the sort!" Gaitskill snapped. "Take Diada to the kitchen. Tell Hopey I said feed her. Hear me?"

Hitch's whole body moved in the general direction of Diada, with the exception of his feet. He swayed toward her like a pendulum, and then swung back. He took a big breath, looked at Gaitskill, and muttered:

"Lawdamussy, Marse Tom, dat woman is *wild;* dat's a plum' hawg-wild nigger, fer shore! An', boss, I tells you honest—ef any cullud pusson in de worl' is wilder dan whut I is, I don't wanter had nothin' to do wid 'em."

"Thunderation!" Gaitskill roared. "Come down here in the yard with me!"

"Yes, suh; I's right on yo' hip. I'll foller as fur as you leads de way."

Gaitskill laid his hand upon Diada's arm, and she turned and looked at him with a suspicious glance, like the expression in the eyes of a dog when petted by a stranger. Hitch backed away.

"Look out, Marse Tom!" Hitch howled. "She's gittin' ready to kick!"

In a moment Diada's eyes changed to a milder expression, and Gaitskill patted her on the shoulder about as he would caress the side of a horse. Seeing this, Hitch crept up nearer, put out his hand and touched Diada's wrist.

"She feels like a shore-'nuff, nachel-bawn nigger, Marse Tom," he exclaimed. "Kin she talk?"

"Yes," Gaitskill told him. "But she can't talk our language, Hitch. She hasn't been in this country long. You'll have to make signs to her and talk to her that way."

"Ax her to say somepin', Marse Tom!" Hitch begged. "Lemme hear how she sounds!"

Gaitskill had not the remotest idea how to make her talk; in fact, he had never heard the sound of her voice. But he did not intend to reveal his ignorance to Hitch Diamond.

"No," he said. "She can talk in the kitchen. Take her around to Hopey."

Hitch walked up, crooked his forefinger, hung it lightly in the sleeve of Diada's dress, and murmured:

"Come along with me, Sister Diada—foller along atter brudder Hitchie Diamond—us'll go git some hot vittles!"

Diada took one step forward; Hitch winced as if anticipating a kick and stopped.

"Fer de Lawd's sake, Marse Tom!" he howled. "I don't *want* dis strange cullud pusson walking behine me! You lead her to de kitchen an' lemme fetch up de rearwards!"

Gaitskill laughed, caught Diada by the sleeve, and led her to the kitchen.

Hopey, the cook, had just taken a pan of hot biscuit out of the oven when the door opened and Diada came in, filling the doorway like a picture in a frame and concealing Mr. Gaitskill, who walked behind her. Hopey's biscuit-pan hit the floor

with a bang, the biscuit rolled around the kitchen, and Hopey sank down in a heap on the nearest chair, covering her head with her flour-sprinkled apron.

"Oh, my Lawd," she said, rocking herself from side to side and whimpering like a puppy. "De ole debbil is done come to git me at last!"

"Shut up, Hopey!" Gaitskill commanded. "Get up from there!"

"Oh, Marse Tom!" Hopey whooped. "Is de Ole Scratch gone?"

"Look up, Hopey, an' trus' de Lawd!" Hitch Diamond boomed, walking over and snatching the apron off of Hopey's head. "Marse Tom is done hired a new fancy cook. He tole me she wus jes' like you. Take a look, Hopey!"

Thus encouraged, Hopey raised her head. Then her wide, easy-smiling mouth widened into a laugh which shook the rafters of the house.

"Marse Tom," she giggled, "you shore is one smart white man. You been blimblammin' me fer twenty year because I feeds eve'y nigger whut pokes his head in my kitchen do'. You ain't gotter feed dem mens no mo', Marse Tom! Des new cook ain't gwine be attracksome to nobody!"

"Hitch is lying to you, Hopey," Gaitskill laughed, glad to find that Hopey was not afraid of Diada. "Diada is here for just a short visit. I want you and Hitch to take care of her for the next two weeks. Feed her something right now!"

Gaitskill walked through the house, seized his hat and hurried down-town. He had enough of Diada

and the negroes, and if anything happened he wanted to be absent.

In the kitchen, Hopey promptly assumed the rôle of hostess and boss.

"Pick up dem biscuits, Diader!" she commanded, pointing to the floor. "You made me drap 'em, now pick 'em up! You got to he'p me eat 'em, too!"

Diada, getting more information from Hopey's gestures than from her speech, stooped down, picked up a hot biscuit, passed it under her nose, snorted with intense disgust, and hurled the biscuit from her with such force that it flattened against the wall and stuck there.

"Hey, dar! Whut you mean, nigger?" Hopey whooped. "Stop flinging dat biscuit aroun' like it wus a gob of mud!"

Diada glanced around and pounced upon the only thing in the kitchen with which she was familiar —a carving knife with a long steel blade. She thrust it into the folds of her dress.

"Hol' on, dar, sister!" Hopey admonished her. "Marse Tom don't allow no stealin' niggers aroun' him. Fetch out dat butcher-knife! Excusin' dat, I gotter slice some ham fer dinner."

Understanding the gestures, Diada returned the knife and Hopey proceeded to slice a large ham. She laid four large cuts upon a plate, then turned her back for a moment. When she looked again Diada had devoured every slice and was hacking at the big ham with the carving knife!

"Whoop-ee!" Hopey howled, rushing at Diada.

"Stop chawin' on dat raw ham! Dat'll gib you *worms*, nigger!"

But Diada did not heed this warning. She cut off a large hunk of the ham, then sat down and devoured it like a dog.

"Hitch," Hopey demanded, watching Diada with popping eyeballs, "whut kind of nigger is dis?"

"I dunno," Hitch murmured. "She muss be some new kind of nigger. She come from furin parts."

"I can't cook no vittles as long as I's got to look at dis circus coon," Hopey declared. "I's gwine up-stairs an' tell ole Mis' Mildred!"

"Don't leave her here wid me all by myse'f, Hopey," Hitch begged. "Take her wid you!"

Hopey walked over and laid her hand on Diada's arm.

"Come on here, you ole fool," she said. "Why don't you ack like nobody else?"

III

ON THE RAMPAGE

Mrs. Mildred Gaitskill was intensely interested in social reforms, uplift movements, purity clubs, and foreign missions. Colonel Tom Gaitskill had often heard her remark that she had "felt a call" to be a missionary to the heathen when she was young; and Mr. Gaitskill, having a better recollection of the characteristics of the superb girl he had taken into his home thirty years before than she had

of herself, was often tempted to tell her that she was nothing but a civilized heathen when he married her.

She had just finished writing the last of twenty invitations to the members of the Dunlap Missionary Society. She began a note addressed to Dr. Sentelle, the pastor of her church. After a few words of explanation she wrote:

I believe that Diada will be helpful in inspiring the missionary ladies of our church with a greater love for the dear heathen.

I have invited all the members of the society to my home to-morrow evening at eight o'clock to see Diada and have her reveal something of the customs of her native land. Will you not honor us with your presence—

The letter writing was interrupted by the entrance of Hopey and Diada—Hopey in the lead, puffing like a tugboat towing an ocean liner.

"Mis' Mildred," she began, "I's jes' 'bleeged to fotch dis here Whut-is-it up to yo' room."

"You refer to Diada?" Mrs. Gaitskill inquired sweetly, her love for the dear heathen enveloping her like a garment.

"Yes'm. Dis here Diader ain't right in her haid. Down in de kitchen she hauled off and throwed one of my biscuit ag'in' de wall an' it *stuck!* She et a whole half a ham *raw!* She swiped de butcher knife right under my own *eyes!* She done ack powerful scandalous, an' ef she potters aroun' my kitchen I ain't gwine *cook!*"

"She doesn't know any better, Hopey," Mrs. Gaitskill told her.

"Yes'm. An' you cain't tell her nothin' because she's plum' deef 'n' dum!"

"Oh, no!" Mrs. Gaitskill smiled. "She can talk! Can't you, Diada?"

Diada leaned over the writing desk, picked up a long, keen, pearl-handled paper knife and thrust it into the folds of her dress; but she did not utter a word.

"Gimme dat knife, Dummy!" Hopey yelled indignantly. "Whut you mean swipin' ole mis's pretties? You keep up dat gait an' de white folks 'll tie you to a tree an' you won't git nothin' to eat fer a week, unless de woodpeckers feeds yer!"

Diada handed back the paper-cutter, but she kept her eyes upon it covetously.

"Whut's de matter wid dis coon, Mis' Mildred?" Hopey wanted to know.

"She's a stranger from a strange land, Hopey," Mrs. Gaitskill replied. "She doesn't understand our ways."

"She sho' is strange," Hopey affirmed with deep conviction. "Look at her eyes an' years an' toofs an' nose! Look at her *stomick*—it don't sag down correck an' it don't stick out at de right place——"

"That will do, Hopey!" Mrs. Gaitskill said sharply. "You must not comment on the personal appearance of your guest——"

"She sho' is a guess—Mis' Mildred. She's got me guessin'!"

"Place a chair by the window, Hopey," Mrs. Gaitskill said. "I'll keep Diada with me."

"*Which?*" Hopey howled. "You gwine let dat coon set in yo' boodwar in one dese gold cheers?"

Hopey placed a rocking-chair by the window and motioned Diada to sit down.

"Set easy, Diader!" she commanded sharply. "Yo' whole hide couldn't hold as much money as dat cheer costed. An' do yo' manners, nigger! You is de onlies' coon whutever set down in ole Mis' Mildred's settin'-room!"

She turned and walked down-stairs, informing Hitch Diamond in tragic tones that Mrs. Gaitskill had "done gone cripple under de hat."

Peering through the branches of a large pecan-tree which stood beside the window, Diada could see the purple haze which hung above the Little Moccasin Swamp. Charmed by this vision she settled back in her chair and remained perfectly quiet.

Mrs. Gaitskill sealed all her envelopes; then finding that she lacked a sufficient number of stamps walked down-stairs to the library. The instant she left the room Diada stepped out on the window-sill, poised for a moment, and leaped with the agility of a monkey from the window to a heavy branch of the pecan-tree. Slipping quickly to the ground she started for the Little Moccasin Swamp.

Avoiding the streets of Tickfall by a detour, she struck into a long, swinging, tireless trot, as rapid as the gallop of a mustang, and in twenty minutes swung off into the bridle-path which led to the Gaitskill hog-camp. Her long skirts hindered her by catching upon the briers and underbrush. She stopped, rolled her skirts up above the knees, knotted them into place by a deft twist, then trotted on.

Standing under the shadow of a live-oak-tree on the Little Moccasin ridge, holding a double-barreled, muzzle-loading shotgun, was a diminutive darky named Little Bit. His eager eyes were searching the branches of a hickory tree for an elusive gray squirrel. Little Bit was afraid of snakes, varmints, his own shadow, and "ha'nts."

"Dis shore is a lonesome place," he chattered to himself. "I's got snake-dust in my shoes, an' a buckeye in my pocket, an' a buzzard's feather in my hat—but I ain't feel like nothin' cain't happen——"

Twenty yards away Diada stood in the shadow of another tree watching him. She was very much interested in the little negro, who had his back to her. With absolutely noiseless tread she approached him—her intentions most friendly and peaceable. When she was ten feet away Little Bit turned around and saw her.

The features of Little Bit's face first expanded, then contracted, then resolved into a heterogeneous mass expressive of more conflicting emotions than he had ever before experienced. The gun fell from his hands and dropped with the barrel resting across his toes. Even in his agony of fright he was conscious of Diada's shortened skirt, and beheld her big, brown knees, knotted and gnarled like the trunk of a black gum-tree. With a trembling hand he reached upward for his hat—a sure sign he was getting ready to go away from there at his best speed.

Like a flash he wheeled and raced bareheaded down the ridge, slapping his hat against his thigh at every step like a jockey lashing his mount. In a

moment he merged himself like a brown, fleeting shadow among the shadows of the overarching trees. Diada picked up the gun, holding it like a club, and striking her tireless trot, followed in his tracks.

Old Isaiah, the venerable negro superintendent of the Gaitskill hog-camp, sat upon the porch of the cabin sunning his rheumatic legs when Little Bit came racing across the clearing at breakneck speed.

"Save my life, Isaiah!" Little Bit shrieked. "She's a comin'!"

"Sot down, Little Bit," Isaiah remarked in a sleepy tone. "You gits at least one good skeer eve'y day. Now set yo' triggers an' take good aim, an' git at de right eend of de gun befo' you shoots her off! Who's a comin'?"

"Gawd knows!" Little Bit moaned.

"Whut do she look like?" Isaiah demanded.

"She don't favor nothin' or nobody!" Little Bit sighed. "*Oo-ee!* Her's got on shoes an' socks, but her dress is cut bobtail——"

He stopped with a shriek. Diada, carrying his gun, came walking sedately across the clearing toward the cabin.

Isaiah gazed upon her for a second, then slowly raised himself to his feet, and with the explosive force of a steam-whistle, he bellowed:

"My—good—gosh!"

He ran to the side of the house where an ax reposed upon the wood-pile. Seizing this, he flourished it in a threatening manner and bawled:

"Hey, dar! Stop! Hol' up! Quit yo' foolin'!"

Diada paid no heed to these admonitions, but

continued her advance, holding Little Bit's gun by the end of the barrel and swinging it like a club.

"Throw a chunk at her, Little Bit!" Isaiah howled. "Skeer her away!"

The boy snatched up a pebble, hurled it at Diada, and ducked under the house.

Diada stopped. Beholding Isaiah's threatening gestures with the ax, she whirled the gun around her head like a cowboy preparing to hurl a lasso, and threw it, butt-foremost, at Isaiah. The weapon curved like an arrow, missed Isaiah's head by two feet, struck against the side of the cabin, smashing the gun-butt to splinters and discharging both barrels!

Thereupon Isaiah and Little Bit departed from the hog-camp and did not come back for two days.

The sound of the explosion frightened Diada, and she leaped back into the jungle like a deer, struck the Tickfall trail, and one hour later sat down beneath the pecan-tree in Gaitskill's yard.

Late that night Colonel Tom Gaitskill stuck his head into the door of his wife's bedroom and demanded in irascible tones:

"Mildred, where are those sky-muckle-dun-colored pajamas young Tom sent me from Chicago?"

"I don't know," Mrs. Gaitskill laughed. "Have you looked for them?"

"Yes, but I can't find 'em. Come and help me hunt!"

Two minutes later Mrs. Gaitskill stuck her head into her husband's room and demanded:

The two began a search, but the missing
re not found. When finally they abando
nt, Gaitskill sighed in relief:
"I hope those pajamas are gone for good.
m was a fool to send me such a slosh of
y were—made me look like a soused rainb

IV

A KIMONO-CLAD APPARITION

The next evening, promptly at eight o'clo
mbers of the Dunlap Missionary Society b
ive. Then Colonel Tom Gaitskill became
l sought out his wife:
"Mildred, are you planning to bring that c
nch into the drawing-room and show her o
"Certainly, Tom," she replied. "That's
ited the ladies here—to see Diada."
"Have you talked to her about it?"
"No. How could I? I've dressed her nic

"All right, Mildred," he grinned. "It's your obsequies. But I hope that dear heathen won't perform any circus stunts."

The conversation was brought to a close by the arrival of the Reverend Dr. Sentelle, an aged, feeble, badly crippled man, who leaned heavily upon his walking stick as he entered the door.

That walking stick was a curiosity. At the large end it was as big around as an average man's leg, tapering slightly toward the lower end, and weighing eleven pounds! Thus spoke the owner about it:

"Sir, this stick came from the battlefield of Shiloh. I was wounded in that battle, sir, and as you can observe, have been a cripple ever since. I fell beneath a dogwood tree and lay there for nearly two days. After the surrender, sir, I returned to the battlefield and cut down that tree and have carried it ever since as a walking stick. The tree was fertilized by my blood, sir, and it is only just that it should bear my infirmities."

While imparting this information, it was the invariable custom of the venerable preacher to catch his stick by the little end and emphasize his remarks by waving it above his auditor's head. And as he could not stand for any length of time without his cane, it was a common thing to see him during his pulpit discourses reverse his stick and shake it at the heads of his congregation, exactly as many an irate baseball player has punctuated his remarks to the fans in the grand stand by flourishing a bat.

As Dr. Sentelle entered the room upon the arm of Colonel Gaitskill, the guests knew that all were

present who had been invited. They stiffened in their seats. They had heard much about Diada since her arrival in Tickfall and they were awed to an electric silence of waiting, holding themselves in smiling readiness for the entrance of the stranger from the cannibal islands of the Pacific Ocean.

The minutes passed. The silence became oppressive. Colonel Gaitskill jiggled his feet. Then through the open window came the voice of Mrs. Gaitskill:

"Hopey, have you seen Diada?"

"No'm. I ain't saw her. I ain't pesterin' my mind 'bout her. Dat nigger ain't my kind of black folks!"

"Go find Diada at once! Bring her into the drawing-room! Hear me!"

"Yes'm, I'll fotch her in!"

Twenty minutes later Mrs. Gaitskill entered the drawing-room alone. The situation was embarrassing, but Mrs. Gaitskill was not even slightly flustered. She possessed an immense reserve of coolness which contrasted sharply on this occasion with the painful distraction of her husband.

The minutes passed—leaden minutes. Some of the guests made a pretense of little conversational flurries.

"Our missionaries are so heroic— The lecture was so edifying— How they must love their work— I have often felt a call— Their lives are very lonely— Sacrifice and service— My daughter shows such a fine missionary spirit— I tell Eula— The lovely cannibals— I always say— Of course——"

These hushed, tentative fragments of conversation were interrupted by the triumphant, booming voice of Hopey:

"Hey, dar—you deef 'n' dum' nigger! Whut you mean by keepin' Mis' Mildred's comp'ny waitin'? Ain't you got no manners?"

Still the minutes passed.

Colonel Gaitskill became quite distraught, and excusing himself, slipped up-stairs and helped himself to the contents of a private decanter. He came back to face the same intense, expectant silence which some of the guests attempted to relieve by exchanging seats with other guests. Once more there were scattering efforts at normal talk:

"The Christmas ship to the Belgians— Splendid missionary spirit— I haven't much to give— I told her God loves the dear cannibals— Home and foreign— All the chickens I took from under the setting hen——"

"Git on up dem front steps!" Hopey howled, as if she were driving a pig. "Go on in dat front do'! Hurry!"

The front door opened and Diada entered, advanced to the center of the drawing-room, and stopped.

It is impossible to describe the peculiar sound which was emitted from the throats of the twenty women at their first sight of Diada.

Her physical ugliness was deplorable and appalling; but that which produced the peculiar utterance from the missionary ladies was this:

Diada was clothed in Mrs. Gaitskill's light-blue,

ments of the same size could not have en
. The pajamas ended just above Diada
es and revealed about four inches of her s
he shoes and stockings being all that s
e of the garments with which Mrs. Gaits
inally clothed her for the reception.
Diada stared about her for a moment, t
vn upon the piano seat.
Her ponderous elbow struck the keys with
discord, and Diada gave forth a sound ex
delight—it sounded like the snort of an el
en using her elbows instead of her han
r immortal heathen proceeded to make th
eavenly noise that ever vexed the ears of C
sionaries, home or foreign.
n the midst of this horrifying situation,
ered the drawing-room, her hands restin
hips, her mouth bawling voluble apologie
My Gawd, Mis' Mildred! I ain't to bl
here turr'ble sight! I foun' Diader settin
pecan tree in de dark, an' I couldn't tell w

Still pounding on the piano with her naked elbows, she began to sing—singing with a voice which caused the tiny threads in the electric-light globes to quiver and grow dim, and wrought such havoc in the ears of the missionary women that they followed Diada's heathen music with a Christian accompaniment of startling yelps, like the frightened squeaks one hears at the county fair when the unsophisticated village maidens loop the loop or dip the dip or hear the wild man of Borneo roar.

Colonel Tom Gaitskill sprang to his feet, seized Dr. Sentelle's walking stick by the little end, and flourished it at Hopey.

"Hopey!" he whooped to be heard above the noise, "you take that—infernal—female—wench out of this house. Do it now! I'll——"

Diada turned around and looked at Colonel Gaitskill. She beheld an immense club flourished threateningly above her head. On the day before, she had seen old Isaiah at the hog-camp waving an ax at her with the same menacing gesture.

With a loud whoop, Diada sprang across the drawing-room, dived headfirst through a large plate-glass window, ran across the yard, and departed from Colonel Tom Gaitskill's hospitable home forever.

V

HITCH ENLISTS THE PARSON'S AID

On the following morning, Mrs. Tom Gaitskill had a real cause for worry: Diada could not be found and was last seen going toward the Little Moccasin Swamp.

This swamp was twelve miles long and eight wide, traversed by winding streams of slow-moving, oily, yellow water, abounding with quagmires, full of poisonous vines and deadly serpents, the feeding range of wild hogs as vicious as wolves. It was a man-trap, a dreadful place to all except the most experienced woodsmen. Many a hunter had led his squirrel-dog into that swamp, and only the dog found his way back home. The man's friends found him a few days later by watching the spiral flight of the buzzards concentrating at one spot in the jungle.

"Tom," Mrs. Gaitskill exclaimed in anxious tones, "you must send Hitch Diamond after Diada at once!"

"Let her go!" Gaitskill replied indifferently. "I'm surfeited with her society. Maybe she'll come back after a while."

"You know she will not, Tom," Mrs. Gaitskill protested with glistening eyes. "If she is not captured before she gets too deep in that swamp, she is gone forever."

"If she took my pajamas with her, I'm fully resigned to the will of the Lord," Gaitskill grinned. "They're gone forever, too."

"Oh, hush!" Mrs. Gaitskill begged, her fine face flushed with mortification. "Oh, those garments in my reception-room—I can't bear to think of them! But we can't let her wander off in that swamp and die."

"I'll send Hitch after her—if he'll go," Gaitskill said, and walked back toward the rear of the

house, where he located Hitch, not by sight, but by sound:

"My wife's strong-minded,
She's double-j'inded,
She ain't tame,
Scan'lize my name——"

The negro ceased singing, jerked off his big hat, and sprang to his feet.

"Hitch," Gaitskill began, "Diada ran away last night. I want you to find her."

"Yes, suh; Hopey narrate me about dat."

"Go out into the swamp and find her!" Gaitskill commanded.

Hitch sat down and scratched his head; he plowed up the dirt with the toe of his ponderous boot; he slapped at the flies with his hat. He was trying to think up a plausible lie as an excuse for declining the proffered job.

"Naw, suh, Marse Tom," he said slowly. "I's powerful sorry, but I jes' nachelly, can't go—er—de lodge meets to-night——"

"You'll be back before night," Gaitskill assured him.

"Yes, suh, but I gotter hustle aroun' an' git some money to pay my dues——"

"I'll pay your dues."

"Yes, suh, but—er—I gotter had my lodge clothes cleaned an' pressed, an'——"

"Get some nigger to do that for you. I'll pay him."

"Yes, suh——"

Hitch stopped. His resources were exhausted. He looked at Gaitskill with a face as expressionless as a glass-eyed doll. "Marse Tom is sho' a quick ketcher," he thought. Then he spoke aloud:

"Marse Tom, I jes' nachelly don't wanter go atter dat coon! Why don't you an' me jes' let her ramble? Us kind of folks hadn't oughter pay dat nigger no pertick'ler mind—she ain't——"

Gaitskill turned and walked away.

He was too much in sympathy with Hitch's argument to discuss the matter. He salved his conscience with the reflection that he had told Hitch to go, although he was pretty sure that Hitch would slip off down-town, stay hid all day, and return at night to report that he had failed to find Diada.

But contrary to Gaitskill's expectations, Hitch did some heavy thinking, then sought out the Rev. Vinegar Atts, pastor of the Shoofly church.

"Elder," be began, "does you b'lieve in corn-vertin' de heathen?"

"Suttinly," Atts replied, scenting a contribution for foreign missions.

"Well, suh," Hitch declared, "now is de choosen time to get right nex' to a shore-'nuff she-heathen. Marse Tom is got her out to his house on a little visit, an' las' night de Revun Sentelle an' all de miss'nary ladies of Marse Tom's chu'ch was makin' 'miration over dat coon, an' I figgers dat us Mef'dis niggers oughter jub'late too."

"Shorely, shorely!" Vinegar Atts boomed. "Whar is dis here she-heathen at?"

"Her's gone out fer a walk in de Little Moccasin

Swamp," Hitch informed him. "Ef us walks out to'des de swamp, 'pears to me we mought meet up wid her an' git real good acquainted."

"Dat's good argufyin'," Vinegar responded, reaching for his hat. "Whut do she look like?"

"Her looks like us niggers—only 'bout fawty-'leben times more!" Hitch told him.

"Kin she talk?"

"Yes, suh, but a feller cain't ketch on to nothin' she specifies. It's a kind of jibber-jabber monkey-talk dat lubricates a whole lot, but it don't show whar at!" Hitch informed him, wondering at the same time how she really did talk—for Hitch had never heard a sound from her throat.

"Ef she cain't talk to us, an' we cain't talk to her, we shore ain't gwine fuss an' fall out!" Vinegar declared.

The big, fat, squat-legged preacher trotted along beside the giant prize-fighter toward the swamp, and by the time they turned off the main road on to the bridle-path which led to the Gaitskill hog-camp, Hitch had told the preacher as much about Diada as he thought Vinegar ought to know. Needless to say, he did not mention her ugliness, her size, her love for raw meat, nor his own overwhelming fear of her.

"Whut's de matter wid dis swamp, Hitch?" Vinegar demanded, gazing at the trees and wiping the copious sweat from his face.

The swamp had suddenly become as hot as an anteroom to hell. The trees had lost their green sparkle, assuming the colors of decay—corpse-

yellow and livid green, shining with an oily, sickening glitter.

Hitch shuddered. It was easy for him to believe that Diada had conjured the swamp and had caused it to assume this aspect of menace.

"Less hump along to'des de hog-camp, Revun!" he exclaimed. "I's skeart of dis place. I been talkin' to hear my tongue rattle, but now I kin shet my mouf an' hear my jaws rattle."

Something scared the birds in the jungle and they flew shriekingly from tree to tree, all going in the same direction.

Submerged among the immense trees of the jungle the negroes could not tell what was happening in the heavens, but they noticed that the sun had changed, no longer spraying off of the tops of the trees like falling water, and the path at their feet had become almost invisible in the darkness.

A wind suddenly swept through the forest, cold as a breeze from the arctic icebergs. Every tree and shrub leaned away from that icy blast, and vines which trailed the ground for hundreds of feet slowly rose up and whirled and writhed in the air like long, slim snakes. In twenty seconds that one puff of wind had passed and there was no more, and the scalding heat rose from the ground like steam from the boiling caldrons of Tophet.

At any other time, Hitch Diamond would have known that a Southern rain-storm was coming and would have paid no attention to it except to seek a cleared spot in the forest, where the dead limbs falling from the trees could not impale him to the ground.

But now his fear was superstitious, and it became infectious to Vinegar Atts and the two raced before the storm like catboats on a wind-swept lake.

Then the rain fell—fell exactly as if some great Titan's hands had lifted up the silver bowl of the Gulf of Mexico and emptied its contents on their heads. The first big drop felt like a bucketful and seemed to wet them all over.

From that moment they stumbled rather than ran, simply fell forward, caught themselves, and fell forward again—who could run under Niagara's tumbling flood?

And thus they ran blindly into the august presence of Diada!

Just as another icy blast swept through the jungle, lasting for twenty seconds and stopping the rain, the two men looked up and beheld Diada, facing the breeze, standing in their path like a rooted tree. She still wore Mrs. Gaitskill's light-blue, pink-flowered kimono, and that gaudy garment trailed out behind her and snapped in the breeze, resembling the variegated tail of some enormous tropic bird.

To the astounded men Diada looked as big as a skinned mule.

With a shriek Hitch Diamond dodged around her, leading Vinegar Atts in the flight by a nose, and the two men ran on toward the hog-camp—the falling rain thundering around them like the sound of a troop of cavalry crossing a wooden bridge.

As they plunged across the open clearing in front of the cabin Hitch looked back.

Diada was forty steps behind him, trotting easily,

covering incredible space with each step, her horrible mouth twisted into a cannibal grin. But it did not look like a grin to Hitch—those immense, protruding teeth and the repulsively thick lips curled back above and beneath them reminded him of nothing so much as the mouth of an angry, biting jackass.

"Here she comes, Vinegar!" Hitch bawled. "Come in an' shet de do'!"

But they were too late. Diada's foot struck the bottom step of the little porch just as Hitch reached the top step. Diada grasped Hitch by the coattail and was towed into the house by that frightened giant who promptly shucked off his coat as he passed through the door and let Diada have it.

Vinegar Atts turned around and took a long look at Diada. He reeled back against the wall, covered his eyes with his hands, and in horror-stricken tones he bellowed:

"Come here, Hitch, an' he'p me! Somepin' is done happened to my eyesight—I ain't seein' right!"

VI

PLACATING A DERVISH

Outside the wind and rain roared like a hurricane and great lumps of hail struck upon the solid roof of the cabin like brickbats, rolled off, and hit the ground with a loud click.

Large particles of hail, looking as if a number of lumps had met and merged in mid-air, fell down the large open chimney, and rolled out upon the floor.

On any other occasion Hitch and Vinegar would have pounced upon them, but now neither moved to pick them up.

The three rain-drenched people stood in the middle of the floor, each in the center of a widening puddle; then they relieved the strain by changing their location and began to drip in a new puddle.

At last Vinegar's legs sank under him, and he dropped upon a chair.

"Oo-ee!" he sighed. "De good Lawd sho' is made a mistake when He fotch me into dis here tangle-up. He's done got my tail caught in a cuttin'-box."

"Talk to her, Revun!" Hitch begged in an agonized whisper.

"You cornverse her, Hitch," Vinegar Atts pleaded. "I'll set right here by you an' pray constant."

Diada walked to the fireplace, squatted down, picked up two splinters of wood and rubbed them together. A tiny blue flame curled around the fingers of the woman. Sheltering the flame with her hands, she added more fuel, and in a moment stepped back from a roaring fire.

"Look at dat!" Hitch Diamond exclaimed in tones of wonder and admiration. "Made a fire by rubbin' two sticks ag'in' each odder. I done tried dat a thousan' times, but I didn't make nothin' but sweat!"

'Whut you reckin she done built dat fire fer, Hitch?" Vinegar inquired with chattering teeth.

"Mebbe she wants to dry out dem clothes she's got on," Hitch surmised.

"I dunno," Vinegar responded in fearful tones.

"It 'pears to me dat it's mighty nigh dinner-time, an' I's done heerd tell dat sometimes dose here she-heathens *eats folks*."

"Oh, hush, nigger!" Hitch mourned, sinking down upon a bench at the far end of the room. "Don't start no news like dat! Please, suh, Revun Atts, git yo' religium wuckin' ag'in' her right now!"

"I don't know how!" Vinegar lamented. "I ain't never had no expe'unce on dis kind of job."

"Whut do de Bible say do?" Hitch demanded.

"It say, 'Watch an' pray,'" Vinegar told him.

"Dat ain't gwine do no good in dis case," Hitch declared with conviction. "You mought as well pour dem advices back into de jug. Leasewise I cain't figger out how it kin do any good. But ef you wants to try it, you do de prayin' an' lemme watch."

"I's mos' too close to dis fire, Hitch," Vinegar remarked uneasily. "I prefers to pray in de kitchen."

"I'll go wid you," Hitch declared eagerly.

The two men entered the only other room to the log cabin, each blocking the other in his eagerness to be the first to get through the door. Diada promptly followed them, and the two men backed against the wall, looking in vain for some way of escape for Diada was between them and the door.

Hanging from the rafters in the kitchen were half a dozen strings of smoked sausages in skins.

Diada reached up and clawed down one of the strings and proceeded to eat the sausage raw. Like a child chewing a thread, she began at one end and lapped up link after link of the sausage. When that

had been devoured, she snatched down another string and began on the end of that. Then she snapped off a link and offered it to Vinegar Atts.

"No'm; thank 'e, mum," Vinegar said. "I likes to watch you chawin' it. Fer Gawd's sake, don't nibble at dat sausage like dat—*eat a plenty!*"

Hitch Diamond pulled down two more strings of the sausage and handed them to her.

"Honey," he said in wheedling tones, "don't encourage no delicate appetite. Fill up—fill up! Wallop up dem sassages till you git whar you cain't do nothin' but chaw because yo' swaller is full up to de top. Den, bless Gawd, dar won't be no room in yo' insides fer me!"

"Huh," Vinegar Atts grunted, "I'd rather had a jackass chaw me dan dat baboon. Look at her toofs!"

At last Diada concluded her feast, tossed the undevoured links of sausage on the floor and started back toward the other room. The two men followed because there was nothing else to do. When they had seated themselves before the fire Vinegar said:

"Hitch, talk to her a little bit an' git her feelin' good, an' mebbe her'll let us go back to town."

"I dunno how to begin," Hitch complained. "Ef a cullud lady won't talk, seems like I cain't git no hand-holt to remark nothin' to her."

"Ax her inquirements!" Vinegar advised.

There was silence in the cabin while Hitch explored his brain for a suitable question to ask. Outside the raid fell in a torrent and the jungle roared like thunder. Finally Hitch spoke:

"Diader, does you enjoy yo' meals in dis country?"

Diada did not answer, but Vinegar Atts did.

"Git away from de subjeck of grub, Hitch. De sausages is done all been et mighty nigh, an' whut is dis she-heathen got to eat fer supper but *us?*"

"I ain't gwine be here fer supper!" Hitch informed him.

"Me neither—ef I makes no mistake," Vinegar replied earnestly. "Go on wid dem inquirements!"

Hitch took a new start:

"Does you had a good time, Diader? Enj'y yo'se'f?"

"Mebbe dat ain't no polite question to ax dis kind of coon," Vinegar remarked when Diada made no answer. "Try somepin diffunt, Hitch!"

"How old is you, Diader?" Hitch asked desperately.

A discreet silence on the part of Diada.

"I knowed you pulled de stopper outen de wrong bottle *dat* time!" Vinegar commented. "Ax her somepin 'bout her kinnery!"

"Wus yo' maw an' paw feelin' tol'able when you seed 'em las'?" Hitch inquired timidly.

To all appearances Diada had not heard.

"Mebbe all her kinnery's in jail," Vinegar declared. "Anyway, she don't wanter talk about 'em. Stop axin' fool questions, Hitch! You put yo' foot in it eve'y time you opens yo' mouf!"

"Looky here, Revun!" Hitch retorted in irate tones. "I fotch you out here wid me to cornvert dis here heathen. You brag yo' brags dat you could, now lemme see you git at it! You ain't axed her nothin'

since you come—jes' been rubber-neckin' at her like a goggle-eye perch. Now you git busy on dis dam' ole baboon an' 'suade her to be a Christian like us is!"

Thus admonished, Vinegar Atts took a big breath, stared timidly at Diada's feet, and began:

"Diada, does you foller up de chu'ch?"

"Git pussonal, Revun, git pussonal!" Hitch advised, when Diada did not reply. "Stop beatin' de bush aroun' de debbil."

"Diader, does you take up wid religion?" Vinegar inquired. But Diada made no reply.

"Ax her do she *expe'unce* religion!" the prize-fighter prompted the preacher. "Ax her do she know dat she's a chile of Gawd!"

"Diader," Vinegar asked timidly, "is you got any shore an' certain hopes of heaven?"

"Dat's right! Git pussonal!" Hitch applauded.

But Diada steadfastly refused to make any confession of faith.

"Ax her is she committed any sins!" Hitch suggested. "Git pussonal!"

"Looky here, Hitch!" the preacher complained. "I don't know how dis cullud pusson sets her table an' I's skeart I'll fall in de soup. Whut's de use axin' pussonal inquirements when a feller don't git no kind of respondunce nohow?"

He leaned back, his face overshadowed with gloom and fear. He thrust his hand into his pockets, and his face suddenly cleared.

"I got her now, Hitch! Look at dis!"

Vinegar held up a small round mirror with an advertisement on the back. He looked at himself,

then passed it to Hitch, who examined his own features carefully, and who then passed the mirror to Diada.

With wondering faces the two men watched the eternal savage feminine to see if it was like the other kind of eternal feminine. It was.

Diada placed the mirror about four inches from one big, protruding eye, squinted into the glass, and then slipped the little mirror into her hair, gave the hair a deft twist, and brought her hands down—empty.

"Dar now!" Vinegar mourned. "My little look-in'-glass is plum' gone, jes' as good as ef she'd swallered it!"

"Dat's right!" Hitch agreed. "Diader shore made a short cut-off."

He raised his eyes to the ceiling in an attitude of religious resignation, and saw Little Bit's mandolin hanging on a nail above his head. He reached up and took it down.

Seating himself, he swept his fingers across the strings. Diada's mouth opened in a wide grin.

"I's got her, Vinegar," Hitch boomed. "Now I's gwine fetch her a few lively toons, an' while I plays you open dat do'. Mebbe I kin sing dis heathen chile to sleep, but ef I cain't, you keep yo' eye on me an' git ready to scoot!"

Hitch got busy with the mandolin, and Vinegar availed himself of the first opportunity and opened the door. The rain had ceased, and from the hot ground a fog had risen like steam so thick and heavy that objects were invisible at a distance of twenty feet.

Hitch sang a few songs, and at the conclusion of each song he moved back from the fire under pretense of being too warm; but he moved every time a little closer to the open door.

Then Diada rose and began a weird, awkward dance, marking the steps by a peculiar guttural sound like a grunt. Under the weight of her ponderous tramping feet the cabin trembled. The negroes trembled, too, but they were having a chill. In a moment their fright had assumed the proportions and powers of a dynamo propelling them out of that cabin.

"Git ready, Vinegar!" Hitch howled, as he madly played and sang. "I's done got in de notion to skedaddle. When I gives de word, you better do it!"

Diada had begun to whirl like a dancing Dervish. Mrs. Gaitskill's silk kimono stood straight out from her mighty shoulders and Colonel Gaitskill's pajamas became a blear of color in her mad gyration.

Vinegar Atts rose and walked toward the door. Hitch Diamond stood up, thumping madly upon the strings of his musical instrument, watching his chance.

Just when the two men were ready to bolt Diada whooped, sprang through the door, leaped into the open space in front of the porch, and continued her mad rotary dance. There was a flash of steel, and from somewhere on her person Diada produced what Hitch recognized as Mrs. Gaitskill's pearl-handled paper-cutter, and the large steel carving-knife which Hopey used in the kitchen.

Then began a dance of steel which filled the negroes with horror.

Diada tossed the knives in the air where they whirled like steel wheels, and beneath them she continued her wild gyrations; with wonderful skill, she kept the two blades in the air above her, catching them unerringly when they fell and tossing them up again, while a strange, guttural shriek emanated from her throat, curdling the blood in the veins of Vinegar Atts and Hitch Diamond.

Suddenly Hitch Diamond bellowed:

"Good-by ma honey! I've run out of money
Good-by, ma honey—I'm *gone!*"

Before the mandolin, which Hitch hurled from him, had struck the ground, he and Vinegar were half-way across the clearing and a race-horse could not have caught them for their first mile of travel back to town.

Pounding up the street toward the Tickfall court-house, Hitch Diamond spoke for the first time in seven miles:

"Elder Atts, I don't b'lieve you really favors furin missions!"

VII

ALARUMS AND EXCURSIONS

Colonel Tom Gaitskill and Dr. Sentelle stood on the street in front of the court house discussing

the missionary meeting of the evening before and the sudden departure of Diada.

"Do you think Diada's visit will quicken the missionary activities of the women of our church?" Dr. Sentelle laughed.

"Who knows?" Gaitskill grinned. "She certainly made an impression on me! An escaped heathen running at large in the vicinity of Tickfall might quicken all kinds of activities——"

Their attention was diverted by the sight of two negroes who stumbled down the middle of the street in the last stages of exhaustion, puffing like steamboats, covered with swamp-mud, their garments torn to shreds by their flight through the vines and underbrush.

"Hey—Hitch!" Gaitskill called.

The two negroes stopped, staggered to where Gaitskill was standing, and sank down upon the curbstone at his feet.

"We done got away, Marse Tom!" Hitch Diamond panted. "Us escaped jes' like de Bible say—wid de skin off our teeth."

"Where have you been?" Gaitskill asked.

"Me an' Vinegar is been huntin' dat Diader you sent me atter dis mawnin'," Hitch answered; then in a tone of sharp complaint: "Marse Tom, whut you makin' all dis splutter 'bout dat varmint fur? She ain't right in her intellectuals!"

"I don't believe you've been anywhere near that swamp," Gaitskill grinned.

"We shore has, Marse Tom," the negroes said in one breath. Then they began a recitation of their

experiences, snatching the sentences out of each other's mouths:

"She built a fire by rubbin' two sticks——"

"She et raw sassages——"

"She danced a jig in dat cabin wid butcher-knives——"

"She had on a chop-tailed nightshirt——"

"An' cute little pants jes' de color of a rotten egg busted on 'em——"

Their recitation was interrupted by the sound of galloping hoofs. Two mules were coming down the road at full speed, one mule ridden by a bent-shouldered old man whose kinky white wool fitted his head like a rubber cap, and the other ridden by a diminutive, pop-eyed boy so black he could shut his eyes and become almost invisible.

At every jump the riders belabored their mules with clubs, thus giving them additional reasons why they should accelerate their operations; and even the mules seemed to realize that it was an urgent case.

They shook their heads, groaned like elephants in distress, and seemed to measure off ten or fifteen feet at a leap. The riders jolted to and fro like two gray squirrels in the storm-tossed branches of a tree, but they hung on to the shaggy manes of their mounts with one hand and operated their clubs with the other.

"Hey, you niggers!" Gaitskill called. "*Whoa!*"

The mules, hearing that last command, stopped.

Now when a mule stops, he stops with a suddenness; he stops all over and all at once; he stops like a

wet dish-rag which drops upon the floor, like a step-ladder which collapses and comes down flat upon the ground.

The mules stopped.

Isaiah and Little Bit did not. They went on. They dived ungracefully over the heads of their mules, struck the ground twenty feet ahead of them, rolled over and over in the moist sand, then got up in a most solemn and dignified manner, walked sedately to the spot where Vinegar and Hitch sat on the curbstone, and took a seat beside them.

"Bless gracious, Marse Tom!" old Isaiah panted. "I's skeart plum' outen my good sense!"

"What happened, Isaiah?" Gaitskill laughed.

"Marse Tom," Isaiah answered, "dar's a plum' wild woman out in de Little Moccasin Swamp. She throwed a gun at me de yuther day an' run me an' Little Bit clear outen de hog-camp. Us rambled back dis atternoon, an' dat wild woman wus still dar —settin' on de po'ch steps bangin' on Little Bit's banjo an' singin' jes' like a pig squeals when he gits hung in de fence. When she seed me a comin', she riz up—she looked powerful mad to me——"

Isaiah broke off and chuckled. Then he continued, in solemn and convincing tones:

"Marse Tom, I've saw a pig git mad an' bust outen de pen an' fight an' bite jes' like a dog an' run eve'y pig and nigger off de plantation. An' I've saw a cow git mad an' kick over de bucket of milk an' hook de feller whut milked her. An' I've saw a man git mad an' cut up scand'lous an' git tuck up an' crammed in jail. An' I've saw a woman git mad—

plenty womans—but I ain't never stayed an' saw whut dey done. Naw, suh, I skedaddles. Dat's how come me an' Little Bit is here now. Dat wild woman looked mad!"

There was a loud whoop up the street, and the sound of galloping hoofs smote again upon the ears of the little group in front of the court house. As they turned to look a whole cavalry troop of horses and mules swung into the main street and galloped at full speed toward the court house square.

It was a perfect Mardi Gras procession.

One aged negro passed on a blind mule, holding a baby in his lap, while two little pickaninnies rode behind him—four on one animal. An immensely fat woman rode by astraddle of a pacing donkey; she balanced a bundle as large as herself on the neck of her mount—food and household comforts of that sort, wrapped up in a red bed-quilt.

A negro boy came by holding a sack whose contents wriggled and whined, and the mustang he rode was throwing fits—the sack contained four hound pups. Another coon rode by holding in his free hand a bucket of molasses; and strapped to his back, like a knapsack was an immense bird-cage containing a parrot, who clung desperately to his giddy perch and squawked: "Look out! Look out! Look out!"

Thus, in grotesque procession, there passed before the astonished eyes of Colonel Tom Gaitskill every negro tenant and workman from the Nigger-heel plantation—four hundred men, women, and children, with his overseer, Mustard Prophet, in the lead!

"Thunderation!" Gaitskill bawled in a mighty voice. "What's the matter with you damnation niggers?"

Mustard Prophet wheeled his mule and stopped before Colonel Gaitskill.

The whole procession swung into a large open space beside the court house, set apart for the use of the country people as a hitching place for their horses. All the business men in Tickfall promptly shut up shop and assembled in front of the court-house to learn what all the fuss was about—and every white man's coat-pocket sagged down on one side about four inches lower than it did on the other, and he kept his hand in that pocket.

The negroes of Tickfall and the neighboring plantations outnumbered the whites by ten thousand.

Having a natural respect and generally a true friendship for the white people, following the peaceable pursuits of agriculture, raising cotton, cotton, and then more cotton; music-loving, laughter-loving, care-free as children and inoffensive as a bird, the negroes of Tickfall lived quietly with their white neighbors and employers.

But any unusual movement among them always awakened the white man's suspicions and brought him forth full-armed, grim as death, white-faced and keen-eyed, to search the matter to the very bottom.

A white man jostled against Dr. Sentelle.

The venerable preacher thrust his hand into the tail-pocket of his clergyman's coat and found himself in possession of a heavy pistol. Colonel Gaitskill

backed quietly into the arms of a man standing behind him and found both side pockets of his coat weighted down with weapons.

Then Gaitskill stepped forward again and became the spokesman, his voice cracking like a bull-whip in the hands of a cowboy:

"What are you niggers doing in town?"

"Us comed to town to git away from de canned bull, Marse Tom," Mustard Prophet informed him.

There was a barely audible "Ah!" from the throats of the white men, who had held their breath in intense desire to catch Mustard's answer. The anxiety of the white men was instantly relieved. They did not understand, but if that crowd of men, women, and children were scared and running away from something, that put a much better light upon the matter.

"To get away from—*what?*" Gaitskill snapped.

"Dunno, suh," Mustard replied, scratching his head. "I's done heerd tell dat she eats 'em alive."

"Eats—*what? who?*"

"Dey calls her de canned bull," Mustard informed him in uncertain tones.

"I presume he means *cannibal*," Dr. Sentelle suggested with a loud chuckle.

"Yes, suh," Mustard acquiesced. "Dat whut I jes' said."

"What do you know about a *cannibal?*" Gaitskill growled.

"Hopey, de woman whut cooks fer you, sont me word, an' old Isaiah an' Little Bit fotch me de

pertick'lers," Mustard told him. "Ole Isaiah tole me dat he done saw dat wild woman fight a bear an' she kilt it dead. He specify dat she gib dat bear de all-under holt an' de fust two bites!"

"Isaiah is an old liar," Gaitskill said.

"Yes, suh. But I knowed you didn't want me to happen to no harm, so I hauled off an' come to town."

"What did you bring all these other niggers for?" Gaitskill asked.

"I didn't fotch 'em wid me, Marse Tom," Mustard declared. "I tried to git 'em to stay back, but sompein itched 'em right sudden to trabbel, an' here dey all am."

There was a loud burst of laughter from the white men, Gaitskill found his coat-pockets relieved of their heavy guns, Dr. Sentelle lost the six-shooter out of the tail of his Prince Albert coat, and the business men went haw-hawing to their stores, leaving Colonel Gaitskill and Dr. Sentelle to face the rabble of panic-stricken negroes.

Gaitskill's mind revolved a number of plans before he found one to suit him. Finally he stood on the court house steps and made oration:

"Hey, you niggers! Listen to me: Go to the back door of my store and get your rations for the night. All you nigger men be at the old cotton-shed to-morrow morning by sunrise! Hear me!"

"Yes, suh!" a number of voices responded.

"Now, Mustard," he said to his negro overseer, "you get all these coons to the cotton-shed on time. We want to get an early start!"

VIII

AT THE GAITSKILL HOG-CAMP

The next morning fifty-five negroes mounted on mules and horses waited at the cotton-shed for Colonel Tom Gaitskill. Their only theme of conversation was Diada.

"Revun Atts," Mustard demanded of the pastor of the Shoofly church, "when you got shet up wid dat wild woman in de hawg-camp, why didn't you ax her 'fess religion?"

"I did make a riffle," Vinegar Atts responded, "but I couldn't git my mouf set right fer preachin' de Word."

"He seen his duty but he done it not!" Hitch Diamond bellowed.

"I didn't had no light on *how* to do it," Vinegar said defensively. "Excusin' dat, I warn't studyin' how to save by grace; I wus ponderin' how to save my grease."

The conversation ended by the arrival of Colonel Gaitskill, dressed in a hunting suit and riding his favorite black horse.

The negroes grouped their mounts close around him to hear what he had to say.

"I want you niggers to ride out to the hog-camp with me and help me bring Diada back to my house. All this talk about Diada being a cannibal is a lie. She ain't a pretty nigger woman, but she's just like other black folks. She won't hurt anybody. When you find her, go right up to her, just like you would to any other nigger woman. Hear me!"

"Yes, suh!" the voices answered.

"Marse Tom," Hitch Diamond asked, "who's gwine lead dis here peerade?"

"I am."

"I's powerful proud to hear dat, kunnel," Hitch declared. "An' please, suh, kin I fotch up de rear an' keep dese niggers from laggin' back?"

"Yes, if you prefer that place."

"Hitch needs he'p, kunnel," Vinegar Atts declared promptly. "I'll fetch up behine wid Hitch."

"All right," Gaitskill agreed, stifling a desire to laugh. "Of course, if Diada should attack us from the rear——"

"Huh!" Vinegar Atts interrupted him. "I's gwine fetch up de exack middle of dis here peerade."

"Now, listen!" Gaitskill commanded in a loud voice. "I don't want Diada hurt in any way. Don't use any clubs or guns or knives. Catch her with your hands. Come on, men!"

The posse pounded down the swamp road for four miles, then started in single file along the narrow bridle-path which led to the hog-camp three miles distant in the center of the swamp.

From the moment they entered the swamp the shouts and laughter of the negroes ceased.

They had all spent their lives within sight of that jungle and knew well its fearful menace and entertained toward it a most wholesome fear. They knew that three deep, broad bayous flowed into it, widened into an enormous mud-puddle and disappeared, swallowed up by rank, encroaching vegetation. They knew that the slow-moving, slimy water was a

breeding place for countless insects which stung and bit and poisoned, and inhabited in pestilential swarms the only open breathing spaces reserved amid the vegetation, and they had seen cattle stagger out of that swamp, their nostrils, throats, and ears filled with tiny insects, fall to the ground in convulsions, and die.

The ground around them was covered with vegetation, so ropy with vines that a raccoon could not penetrate it; the branches of the immense trees hung downward, and were draped with long, ropelike funereal streamers and festoons of Spanish moss, so that it seemed that half the vegetable world was growing from below upward and the other half was growing from above downward, making a hot-house purgatory, shut off from the sky above and the earth below, and enclosing the men who rode that narrow path like a trap.

The dim ridge which their horses trod was the one route of ingress and egress through that obscure, uncharted morass reeking with poison and choked with a growth which seemed coeval with the dawn of creation itself.

Gaitskill, noting the sudden silence of the negroes, became uneasy. He knew that if the darkies were thrown into a panic they would spur their mounts into the jungle to hide, and that would be the end of both the horse and his rider.

"Marse Tom," old Isaiah said in a trembling tone, "My hoss is a walkin' lame."

Gaitskill stopped and stood facing the long line of frightened negroes.

"All you niggers pull to one side and let Isaiah ride back to town!" he called.

"Who? Me?" Isaiah bawled. "Naw, *suh!* Dis hoss ain't so powerful lame—not as much as he wus when I fust spoke. An' even if his behine leg wus twisted plum' off, I'd shore make him hop along wid you-alls."

"Any of the rest of you niggers got lame horses?" Gaitskill laughed.

"Naw, suh, kunnel," Hitch Diamond yelled, the last man in the line. "My hoss is walkin' so spry I cain't keep him behine by hisse'f. Lemme ride up dar close to you!"

"Stay where you are, Hitch!" Gaitskill laughed. "You asked me to let you ride behind. Come on, men!"

The path widened and the horses struck into a trot which brought them to the hog-camp in half an hour.

Throughout the length and breadth of this swamp, about a mile apart, there were curious mounds rising ten or twelve feet above the surrounding marsh. All these mounds were round in shape and flat on the top.

Some of them were not more than a hundred feet in diameter, while others were large, containing half an acre of land. They had been built a hundred years before by the Indians—and served a very practical purpose. When the water flooded the swamp in the autumn the wild animals took refuge on these mounds. The Indians penetrated the jungle in their canoes and visited each mound, easily

slaying the deer and bears, and thus procuring their winter supply of meat.

The Gaitskill hog-camp occupied the largest of these mounds, the cabin standing in the center of a two-acre plot. The flat top of the mound had been kept cleared of timber, but the jungle encroached to the very edge.

The posse galloped into this clearing, and Colonel Gaitskill dismounted from his horse.

"You darkies stay here!" he commanded. "I'll see whether Diada is in the cabin."

The cabin was empty. All of Isaiah's smoked sausage and hams had disappeared. Little Bit's mandolin, with the strings broken, lay in the corner of the room, and a part of Mrs. Gaitskill's silk kimono hung from a splinter on the wall, showing how it had been torn off. From a nail on the wall hung a long lasso.

Taking down the rope Gaitskill walked out again to the negroes.

"She's not here, men," he announced. "We'll have to hunt her in the swamp."

Adjusting the rope to his saddle-horn he mounted and sat for a moment debating his next move.

Then Diada emerged from the jungle and stood at the edge of the clearing, looking curiously at the troop of men.

"Dar she!" the negroes howled.

Gaitskill rode slowly forward, holding out his hand in a gesture of friendliness about as one would approach to catch a horse. But Diada moved slowly backward, keeping in the cleared space, always just one leap distant from the jungle.

Twice they circled the clearing in this ridiculous fashion, Gaitskill repeating in most wheedling and coaxing tones every expression of fondness and endearment with which he was acquainted.

"Dat chin-music ain't gittin' Marse Tom *nothin'*," Vinegar Atts declared, watching the elusive Diada. "Me 'n' Hitch's done tried dat!"

Finally Gaitskill abandoned that plan, and quietly loosened his rope and got ready to throw.

Riding back a few feet he gave the rope a quick swing, and the noose settled prettily around the arms of the giant woman just above her elbows. There was not a trace of fear in her face, and she moved slowly backward until the rope was taut. To the interested negroes it looked like the simple, peaceable game of "playing horse."

Then Gaitskill spurred his horse to one side and gave the rope a sharp jerk. Instantly a long-bladed butcher-knife flashed in Diada's hand, and the severed rope trailed loosely upon the ground, while the now harmless noose slipped down over her hands and was lightly tossed aside.

"Dar now!" Hitch Diamond exclaimed in tragic tones. "Dat fish is done unbit an' div!"

Gaitskill slowly drew in the rope and was busy making another noose, when there was a warning shout from the negroes.

Diada was coming across the clearing toward Gaitskill, leaping like a deer. There was no trace of anger in her manner, and no sign of danger except the long-bladed knife in her powerful hand.

Gaitskill's nervous horse shied at that monstrous

woman with her fluttering, ragged garments, and wheeled and bolted, snorting with terror.

The jungle kept the horse in the clearing as effectively as a barbed-wire fence, but the animal had two acres of level ground to run on and he proceeded to cover that ground in record-breaking time. Gaitskill might have quieted the animal very quickly, except for the fact that this performance seemed to please Diada, and she continued her pursuit, chasing Colonel Gaitskill all around the lot.

"Look out, Marse Tom!" the negroes bawled, amid whoops of laughter. "Don't let her ketch yer!"

The laughter of the nergoes diverted Diada's attention to them.

With a loud "*Whoosh!*" she sailed into that compact mass of men and horses, scattering them like a brick dropped into a pile of feathers. Horses nickered and plunged, mules squealed and kicked, and negroes screamed with fright, and in a moment the cleared space in front of the hog-camp was a circus-ring of panicky men and beasts performing every imaginable stunt, with Diada in the star rôle of circus-master and chief of clowns.

Colonel Gaitskill's horse found the path which led back to Tickfall, plunged down the embankment, and ran away with his helpless rider. The negroes, seeing Gaitskill's departure, followed at their swiftest gait, their shrieks and wails of fright and woe rolling through the swamp with hideous reverberations.

One mile from the hog-camp Gaitskill regained control of his horse, and turned to ride back.

Then he heard the thundering hoofs of the horses and mules coming down the narrow bridle-path toward him. The road was not wide enough to pull aside and let them pass; even if it were, in that moment of panic, the horses and mules might become frightened at him and plunge into the swamp.

Gaitskill regretted the necessity for his action, but there was nothing else to do; he led that column of wailing negroes in ignominious flight back toward Tickfall.

He kept ahead of them until he reached the main road, then turned aside and let them precede him.

As he sat watching that ludicrous procession of squalling blacks, his own horse suddenly snorted and bolted down the road at its wildest speed. Gaitskill looked back to ascertain the cause of the animal's fright.

Lo, Diada was in full pursuit of the flying posse, trotting with the speed of a galloping horse, her tongue hanging out like a hot dog's, Mrs. Gaitskill's kimono trailing behind her like a torn battle-flag, her long, ugly-bladed knife clutched in her powerful hand. One word came from her throat with the explosive sound of a pistol-shot:

"*Whoo-ash!*"

There was no stopping his horse, so Gaitskill rode the four miles back to Tickfall in something like eight minutes. When he swung out of the swamp road into the town he looked back again.

Diada was half a mile behind him, trotting tirelessly, covering about ten feet of ground with each

tremendous stride. Her farewell admonition came to him across the distance.

Softened by the intervening space, it seemed to contain a plaintive note of appeal; yet this impression was but momentary, for Gaitskill found too close a kinship between this outlandish expression and the snarl of the wolf, the hiss of the snake, and the scream of the jungle beast bent on blood and death.

IX

"DESE HERE IS TURR'BLE TIMES"

Fifty-five terrified negroes galloped wildly into Tickfall, distributed themselves in the various negro settlements of the village, and told fifty-five separate and distinct tales of horror about the fiasco at the hog-camp.

One half truth ran through all the narratives, holding them together as vari-colored beads are held upon a string:

"Marse Tom Gaitskill bragged his brags at de cotton-shed dat he wus gwine walk right up an' put his hand on dat wild woman. But he never done it a-tall—naw, suh.

"He didn't git no nigher dat woman dan de eend of a lassoo, an' when she snuck up behine him wid dat big butcher-knife in her han', dat white man jes' nachelly *'vaporated!* Yes, suh! Us niggers tried to keep up an' go along home wid him, but we ain't never got in sight of Marse Tom till yit—an' us is plum' back in town! Dat nigger woman run at us

jes' like a wild hawg—you-all knows how de hawgs pop dey jaws an' says '*Whoosh!*' When a wild hawg does dat way, nigger, you better coon up a tree. Well, suh, dat's jes' whut she said to us—'*Whoosh!*'"

Thus the negroes walked from house to house telling their appalling stories to little groups of pop-eyed listeners, adding something more blood-curdling to the tales with each repetition, until the terrified inhabitants of Shiny, Shoofly, Hell's Half-Acre, and Dirty Six were as uneasy and fearful as if they were standing in the crumbling crater of a rumbling volcano.

Then the grapevine telephone was put into operation.

There is nothing as mysterious to the white man as the negro's method of communicating information for long distances and to the remotest cabins of his race. "Word wus sont," is the negro's only explanation of how he happened to know twenty minutes after it occurred that a murder had been committed in the woods twenty miles away.

Long before night the town began to fill up with negroes coming in from plantations ten and twelve miles away. They arrived unostentatiously, seeming to spring up from the very sand of the street. They seemed jumpy when they were spoken to, moved about not singly but in groups, and kept looking back over their shoulders.

The white people of the town noticed the anxiety and strain, and it became a contagion. They knew that a wild woman was at large, meditating they knew not what outrage.

The sun set as red as blood, and in a few minutes a heavy, smelly, yellow Gulf fog swept the town, making objects invisible at a distance of twenty feet, almost blotting out the little electric lights which had just enough candle-power to reveal where they were but not sufficient to show where anything else was.

The Reverend Dr. Sentelle stumped his way down to the post office upon his ponderous cane, mailed a letter, and stood for a moment in the doorway puffing a cigar. Several negroes passed, walking down the middle of the street just as the venerable preacher flicked his cigar-stump toward the gutter. The butt whirled round and round and struck the ground with a splash of fire from the lighted end.

What a howl!

The men ran down the street yelping like hound-dogs, their feet pounding upon the sand, their voices trailing off into less audible sounds of woe as they continued their rapid flight.

Wondering at the unusual occurrence, Dr. Sentelle felt his way back to his home through the thick fog, and stood leaning upon his gate gazing up the street.

An object approached him, loomed up with gigantic proportions through the fantastic exaggerations of the fog, stopped a few feet from where the preacher stood, and spoke one word in a thunderous tone:

"Whoosh!"

Dr. Sentelle's heavy walking stick went clattering upon the ground, he reeled backward, struck his heels against the porch steps, and sat down with a

violence which filled the dome of his cranium with bursting, falling stars.

"Heavens!" he exclaimed.

Diada stooped, picked up Dr. Sentelle's stick by the little end, and, thus armed with a weighty club, she went loping onward.

A group of darkies sat in a negro barber-shop discussing the wild woman of the woods. Diada opened the door, entered as quietly and peaceably as she could, and remarked:

"Whoosh!"

The negroes disappeared as promptly and as completely as if that word were a cyclone puffing at a handful of feathers.

Diada trotted down the street in the direction they had gone and found herself in front of the Hen-Scratch saloon, where a house full of patrons talked in whispers and fortified themselves by indulgence in red liquor. Diada entered the swinging door and gave the pass-word: "Whoosh!"

The negroes whooshed. They went away from that place in every direction, exhausting the treasuries of their throats for sounds to vocalize their surprise and terror.

Suddenly from every negro section of the town there arose a wail which reverberated through the village of Tickfall and brought every white man to his feet white with fear:

"*Ah-ee! Ah-ee! Ah-ee!*"

Every white man seized his arms and ammunition and started for the front door; then the thought of his defenseless family stopped him, and held him

there to patrol his yard and guard his own house from the unknown peril which threatened.

Everywhere could be heard this wild call of fear.

Horses and mules broke out of their enclosures and galloped wildly about the streets with a thunder of pounding hoofs, calling to each other with frenzied nickering. The cows began a ceaseless bawling, and the excited dogs ran madly up and down the premises of their masters, making a pandemonium with their furious barking.

At intervals the noise lulled for a moment; then invariably would be heard a wild scream, clear as the outcry of a panther, ending with Diada's one word, divided now into two distinct syllables:

"*Whoo-ash!*"

Colonel Tom Gaitskill leaned against the white columns of his porch and listened to the weird sounds which came to him from every quarter. In one negro settlement the inhabitants were bawling a song at the utmost capacity of their lungs, drowning their fears with music.

In another settlement, with the regularity and drumlike throb of a mighty chorus of immense hammers pounding upon steel anvils, was heard the cry: "Ah-ee! Ah-ee! Ah-ee!"

From the section of the town occupied by the whites could be heard the nickering and running of horses, the bellowing of the cows, the barking of the dogs, and now and then a fusillade of pistol shots. While in the negro section closest to his home, Colonel Gaitskill could hear the Rev. Vinegar Atts bellowing like a bull of Bashan, praying in a voice which

could be heard a mile, while those who knelt with him backed him up in his stentorian implorations with responses which echoed like a roll of thunder:

"O Lawd, dese here is turr'ble times——"

("Listen, Lawd, dat's de trufe—turr'ble times ——")

"De sun is done turned inter darkness an' de moon inter blood, an' de dreffful day of de Lawd am come——"

("O-o-o Lawd, she sho' am come——")

"We done saw de woman clothed wid de sun an' de moon am under her foots——"

("Ah-ee! Amen!")

"Accawdin' to Dy Word she done flied out to de wilderness whar she done been nourished fer a time, an' half a time, an' yuther times——"

("Ah-ee! Double time——")

"Woe to de inhabiters of de yearth——"

("Whoa!")

"O-o-o Lawd, fotch down thy angel to tote dis nigger home——"

Not a man or woman, white or black, closed an eye in Tickfall that night.

The sheriff and a number of business men held innumerable conversations over the telephone and finally a company of them convened in the sheriff's office in the courthouse to confer about what should be done to quell the panic. But conversations and conferences came to naught because they were afraid to go through the negro settlements in the dense darkness lest some panic-stricken negro fire

upon them from behind the door or beneath some cabin.

At the first streak of dawn the negroes, with one accord, moved toward the business part of the town and assembled in a dense mass around the courthouse, looking to the white people for protection.

Sheriff Flournoy made them a speech telling them that the white people were their friends, that no harm could come to them, that there was no cause for uneasiness, and that he wanted them to stay around the courthouse all day.

At the conclusion of his speech, Flournoy started across the street to enter the Tickfall bank. There was a wild yell from the negroes and a mighty scramble among them to get around on the other side of the courthouse.

Diada came out of an alley beside the Gaitskill store and stood in the middle of the street. She was holding Dr. Sentelle's ponderous walking stick by the small end like a club. She gazed, apparently in wonder, at the crowd of negroes and whites.

As the silent mob viewed her with alarm, wondering what outrage she would commit next, she caught the big stick with a hand on either end, raised it high above her head, and screamed:

"Whoosh! Whoo-ash! Whoosh!"

Flournoy drew his pistol and fired in the air above her head three times.

Diada ducked at each shot, then she stood upright, whirled the club around her head, and threw it at the sheriff. The missile curved like an arrow and went straight toward the mark. Flournoy

avoided a crushed skull by falling flat upon the ground and letting the club pass over him.

When he rose to his feet, Diada was trotting down the road with the speed of the wind.

"Get your horses—everybody!" Flournoy shouted.

With that word of command began the greatest man-hunt that Tickfall Parish had ever known.

X

THE MAN-HUNT

Every man in Tickfall who had any sort of animal to ride bestrode the beast and joined the procession, which moved out of town in the wake of Diada. Hundreds of negroes who had ridden in from the plantations the night before galloped down the road behind the whites. And every canine of any size or color attached himself to the posse and went plunging along with the men.

They came to a straight stretch of road where they could see for over two miles. At the far end of that stretch they beheld Diada, her head and shoulders stooped far over, trotting with gigantic strides, traveling with the tireless persistence of a desert camel.

To their surprise, Diada did not run into the swamp, but continued upon the main road, which led to the Tickfall landing on the Mississippi River. Seeing this, the men did not attempt to run her down, but remained content to keep her in sight. At the end of an hour she was still trotting easily with no signs of fatigue.

Finally Diada turned and ran into the forest. With a mighty clamor the men raced after her, floundering through the underbrush, and galloping far over into the woods. When the posse had passed out of sight among the trees, Diada quietly climbed down from the branches of a big tree, where she had concealed herself, and started down the road again.

The dogs discovered her first.

Yelping furiously they drove her from the main road across the prairie marsh which skirted Lake Basteneau, and penned her upon a narrow point which projected like a peninsula into the lake and was thickly overgrown with cypress saplings about as large around as a man's wrist.

The marsh between the road and the lake was too soft for the men to venture on with their horses, and it was even dangerous for a man to walk upon because of the quicksands. But the men could look from the road, across a part of the lake, and easily see Diada and the dogs.

"Don't go after her, men!" Flournoy called. "Let the dogs run her away from there! We'll get her when she comes off that point!"

With the large butcher-knife which she had procured from Mrs. Gaitskill's kitchen she had begun to cut down the cypress-saplings, trimming off the leaves and the branches. She piled them up, dozens of them, working swiftly.

The dogs did not advance to attack Diada. They merely stood and barked at her. But they were in possession of the only exit from the narrow point on which Diada had been trapped.

"Dat gal must be gittin' ready to beat dem dogs off wid dem poles," Hitch Diamond remarked to the other negroes. "She's shore put a job up on herse'f."

But Diada had a surprise in store for them all.

Balancing one of the long saplings on the top of her hand she hurled it like a javelin with the speed and accuracy of an arrow. A hound-dog gave a yelp which seemed to break in two in the middle—then he died. The javelin had pinned him to the ground like an entomologist's specimen on a cardboard.

Then the javelins flew thick and fast into that bunch of dogs, and every flying weapon found a mark and brought forth a yelp of death. In a few moments the dogs turned tail and came whining back to their masters.

Diada snatched up a number of the javelins, ran off the point of land, and trotted down the edge of the lake toward the river.

"Leave your horses and follow her, men!" Flournoy ordered.

Four hundred men sprang to the ground, spread out in a long line like a fish-seine and went plunging across the marsh in pursuit of the fleeing woman. The grass was waist high, dead and dry as dust, but it offered no places for concealment, and Diada's tall form was easily kept in sight.

At intervals the woman turned and hurled a javelin at the posse, but they were careful to stay out of danger.

In a little while the men noticed that Diada had begun to show signs of exhaustion. She was travel-

ing more slowly, stopping now and then to catch her breath, and moving forward with a more pronounced stoop to her mighty shoulders.

She had eaten nothing for two days, had had no rest or sleep, and was now on the last lap of a twelve-mile run at full-speed!

Finally she slowed down to a walk, and the walk became a sort of stumble. She still carried a few of her javelins, and it was evident that she was now dependent upon them to keep her pursuers at a distance, while both she and they realized that she was now in the center of a prairie of marsh grass where she could not supply herself with new weapons when those she possessed were exhausted.

Something of the pathos of the situation dawned upon the men, both white and black, and they became silent, eyes strained toward the weakening, staggering quarry, so soon to fall into their hands.

For twenty minutes the silence was unbroken except for the swish of the marsh grass as the men waded through it. Far across the prairie could be seen the levee of the Mississippi River.

Suddenly the silence was broken by the long, clear, musical whistle of a boat upon the river.

Diada stopped. Again that long, clear whistle came belling across the sun-scorched prairie.

Diada raised her hands straight up above her head like a sun-worshiper, emitted a long, plaintive, howling scream, which ended with that word which was branded upon the memories of Tickfall forever: "Whoosh! Whoo-ash!"

So dramatic was her action that the hair stood up

on every man's head, and a cold chill swept across every sweat-drenched body.

The woman trotted slowly onward, moving now in a straight line toward the river. She had nearly a mile to travel to reach the levee, and she saw that she could not make the distance before she was captured.

Then she sprung another surprise—one which came very near being the death of her pursuers.

Kneeling in the grass she picked up two tiny splinters of bark and rubbed them rapidly together. A small blue flame curled around her fingers and caught in the dry marsh grass. Running to another point she dropped the flame there.

Then a wild yell of horror swept across the prairie and she beheld four hundred men in a panic, fleeing for their lives.

Diada was safe from the fire because what little breeze there was blew landward from the lake. In an incredible time that prairie had become a furnace of fire, the racing flames pursuing the screaming men, making a scene resembling nothing so much as the picture of that hell so vividly described "where the smoke of torment ascendeth and there is weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth!"

The fire was checked when it reached the wide sandy road which led to the Tickfall landing.

By the mercy of Heaven the men reached that road unscorched by the flames! Mounting their horses, they looked across the charred grass of the prairie and beheld Diada trotting slowly onward toward the Mississippi levee.

With a wild shout they sent their steeds pounding down the road after her.

Then around the bend of the river came a beautiful sea-going yacht—an exquisite queen of the waters. Her whistle emitted four long, clear signals for the Tickfall landing.

"By George!" Colonel Gaitskill exclaimed, "that is Captain Lemuel Manse's yacht. My telegram caught him at Vicksburg, and he turned around and came back!"

In a moment the yacht came opposite to where Diada stood upon the bank of the river. The watching men saw her lift her hands high toward the heavens. Then they heard a long, clear shout, ending with the familiar: "Whoosh! Whoo-ash!"

The yacht answered with two short, sharp whistle signals.

Diada ran swiftly down the levee, and then leaped high and plunged far over into the muddy waters of the Mississippi!

The wondering, watching men saw her head emerge from the waves, saw her swim like a fish to the yacht, saw her seize a rope which was tossed over the side, and climb hand over hand to safety and rest and peace and the care and protection of her friends!

"That's all, men!" Gaitskill said in a voice which choked in his throat. "You may all go back home now. Diada is gone from Tickfall forever!"

XI

"WHU ATCH"

The yacht anchored in the middle of the river; a skiff went to shore and brought Colonel Tom Gaitskill and Sheriff Flournoy on board.

Sitting around a small table on the deck they told Captain Lemuel Manse the story of Diada's sojourn in Tickfall.

Finally Gaitskill asked:

"Lem, what the devil did that wench mean by hollering 'Whoosh!' at everybody?"

"She was not saying 'Whoosh,'" Captain Manse replied. "What she said was '*Whu atch!*' That was the first expression she used to me when the cannibal chief brought her aboard the yacht."

"Well, what does it mean?" Gaitskill persisted.

Captain Manse put his hand with a kindly gesture upon his friend's arm and told him.

Gaitskill's fine face turned ashen, and he winced as if a knife had pierced his heart.

The words mean:

"*Help! I am in trouble!*"

Getting Ready to Die

SHERIFF JOHN FLOURNOY loafed in the office of the Tickfall *Whoop*, and listened to the bark and splutter of a little one-dog-power engine attached to the printing press. The air was permeated with the odor of gasoline, machine oil, and printers' ink. The cigar he was attempting to smoke tasted of all three, and he tossed it out of the window.

"Just before Christmas is the worst time of the year," he sighed impatiently. "Everybody tries to be so blame cheerful and good-natured."

He turned around in his screaking swivel-chair and glared at the typewriter on the table before him. He reached out an idle finger and touched a key; there was an immediate response in the sharp tap of the type upon the platen.

"I never did fiddle with one of these things," he grinned to himself, as he picked up a sheet of paper and adjusted it in the machine. "But I'm never too old to learn."

Then, with the ponderous middle finger of each giant hand, the big sheriff began to poke out letters which spelled words—sometimes. Tiny beads of sweat came out on his forehead; his iron jaws clamped; his lips tightened; and a strained look came into his

eyes, accentuating the tiny wrinkles which formed crows'-feet on each side of his temples.

"Gosh!" he complained. "I never worked as hard in my whole life. Why in thunder don't they arrange these letters alphabetically, instead of scrambling them all over the ranch so a feller can't find them?"

After a long time he leaned back with a sigh of infinite relief and snatched the paper from the machine. A broad grin spread over his face at the sight of his handiwork.

"This is a fearful and wonderful thing," he chuckled. "I didn't know there were as many figures, punctuation marks, and capital letters in the world as I have interspersed gratuitously in this interesting communication."

The bark and splutter of the gasoline engine suddenly ceased. Flournoy sprang up and opened the door of the office entering into the press-room.

"What's the matter?" he demanded. "Broke down?"

"Naw," the one lone printer informed him. "I'm finished."

"No, you ain't!" Flournoy informed him. "Come in here a minute!"

Wonderingly, the printer entered the office. Flournoy handed him the sheet of paper on which he had been writing.

"How much space will that take in your paper?" the sheriff asked.

The printer finished reading, broke into a loud laugh, and answered:

"About two sticks."

"All right," Flournoy grinned. "You set that up, take some article of the same length out of your paper, and put mine in its place. Then run me off three copies."

Half an hour later the printer entered the office with three damp copies of the Tickfall *Whoop* and pointed to the contribution which Flournoy had furnished.

"These three papers are all you ran off?" the sheriff asked.

"Yep."

"All right. You understand this piece of news is not for general circulation."

Folding and pocketing the three copies, Flournoy walked slowly back toward his office in the courthouse.

Sitting on a stone step in front of the court house, trusting the December sun to limber up his rheumatic muscles, was old Isaiah Gaitskill. Motionless as a stone idol, his battered wool hat in his clawlike hand, toothless, his face wrinkled like the withered hull of a walnut, his snow-white wool fitting his head like a rubber cap, he made a characteristic picture of the South.

"Have you seen a copy of the Tickfall *Whoop* this morning, Isaiah?" Flournoy asked.

"Naw, suh. I lef' my specks to home, an' so I didn't git no paper," Isaiah answered easily.

"Here's one of 'em," Flournoy grinned, taking it from his pocket. "You better look it over—there's something about you in it."

"How's dat, boss?" Isaiah asked quickly. "Who knowed my name so good dat he writ' me in de paper?"

"Your name isn't mentioned," Flournoy smiled. "It just speaks of the colored folks in general. Shall I read the article to you?"

"Yes, suh, ef you please, suh," Isaiah answered eagerly. "I hadn't oughter lef' my readin' specks at de hawg-camp. My Lawd, how come all de niggers got spoke about in de white folks' paper?"

Flournoy impressively opened the sheet, adjusted his eye-glasses with dignity, frowned portentously, knowing well that the negro was watching every move. Having thus impressed Isaiah with the importance of the article, Flournoy read aloud what he had written a few minutes before:

DANGER! DANGER!

ALL THE NEGROES IN TICKFALL ABOUT TO DIE!

A mysterious disease has broken out among the negroes in Tickfall, resulting in a number of sudden deaths. The doctors of the town declare there is no cure. The parish health-officer, Dr. Moseley, pronounces the disease to be "ancestors," and declares that all the negroes have them——

There was a lot more of the same sort, and it was read aloud by Sheriff Flournoy with due impressiveness, and with the design of striking terror into the hearts of the negroes of Tickfall. When he had

finished reading, this incorrigible practical joker asked seriously:

"Would you like to have a copy of this paper, Isaiah?"

"Yes, suh, boss! Gimme two copies!" Isaiah exclaimed as he sprang to his feet. "I's gwine down an' tell de niggers somepin dey don't know!"

Snatching the papers from the sheriff, old Isaiah started toward Dirty-Six with surprising speed for a man of his age and feebleness. The first person he met was the Rev. Vinegar Atts.

"How come all dis bust of speed, Isaiah?" the fat preacher grumbled. "Whut's itchin' on you to trabbel so peart?"

Isaiah thrust the paper into the hands of Vinegar Atts.

"Read!" he chattered. "Read dat paper an' git ready to die!"

The fat, pot-bellied, squat-legged preacher spraddled his feet in the middle of the road like a Colossus and began to read. Suddenly his hand trembled, his feet began to shuffle in the sand, and he breathed heavily and audibly, like an asthmatic donkey. When he had finished, his hands dropped inertly to his sides, and with wide-open mouth, he sucked in a breath which threatened to consume all the air in Tickfall.

"My Gawd!" he bawled. "Isaiah, I tell you de honest truth—I ain't fitten to die. I ain't made no kind of arrangements to die!"

"Dat's right!" Isaiah agreed mournfully. "Dis here terr'ble news is done kotch me up short, too!"

"Lemme sot down!" Vinegar panted, as he walked to the curb and sat down with his feet in the gutter.

The paper shook in his trembling hand, and Vinegar glared at it with horror-stricken eyes. One imagines that a condemned criminal would gaze at a cup of poison with such a look. The man's thick lips turned ashen, and when he snatched off his hat his scalp had become furrowed with little ridges.

To one unfamiliar with the negro character, it is almost incredible how much importance the members of that race attach to the printed word. Since that time, over half a century ago, when every negro received a copy of the Emancipation Proclamation and by the magic of print found himself free from bondage, it has never occurred to one of them to question the veracity of any article in book, magazine, or newspaper. Printed words have the potency of words of Holy Writ.

"O Lawdy!" Atts bawled. "Ain't dis awful? My gosh, I never had no notion befo' whut a mean, wuthless, onery nigger I is! Isaiah, I's a *bad* nigger. Nobody don't soupspicion how bad I is!"

"Gawd knows!" Isaiah remarked gloomily.

"Yes, brudder," Vinegar whined, gasping for air. "Dat is whut is troublin' my mind right now!"

"Sheriff John Flournoy gimme two papers," Isaiah said. "I cain't read nothin'. I's gwine leave 'em wid you. I's moseyin' back to de hawg-camp to git ready to die!"

"Dat's right, Isaiah," Vinegar mourned. "Dat is all whut is lef' fer us po' niggers to do. Less all start to git ready to prepare to die!"

A few minutes later Vinegar Atts entered the Hen-Scratch saloon, dragged his lead-weighted feet over the sand-covered floor, and fumblingly spread out a copy of the paper upon the table before the eyes of Skeeter Butts, Hitch Diamond, and Figger Bush.

"Read dat, niggers!" he bellowed in awe-stricken tones. "Read an' prepare fer de end!"

Skeeter Butts started to read the article aloud, but long before he had finished his voice was trembling until he could hardly enunciate the awful words. He stopped, placed his quivering hands over his face, tried to rub the stiffness out of the muscles of his lips and cheeks, and sighed:

"You finish it fer us, Revun! Dis is awful!"

When Vinegar Atts concluded, the three negroes groaned aloud.

"Whar did you git dat paper, Revun?" Hitch Diamond inquired, his giant form shaking with the palsy.

"Isaiah got it from Sheriff Flournoy," Atts replied.

"Ef Sheriff Flournoy an' Dr. Moseley is tuck it up, dar ain't no hopes fer us," Skeeter Butts lamented. "Dem white mens do bizzness wid niggers 'thout no pity. De pest-wagon is comin' fer us all!"

Into each mind came the instant recollection of that dreadful time, thirty years before, when the yellow-fever had invaded Tickfall, leaving barely enough of the living to bury the dead; when two-wheeled carts had rumbled through the negro settlements of Tickfall at midnight, and the cart-driver had bellowed

through a cloth saturated with carbolic acid and wrapped around his mouth: "Bring out your corpse!"

"Whu-whu-whut is ancestors?" Hitch Diamond stammered, glaring at the newspaper. "Whut kind of new ailment is dat?"

"De paper don't say," Skeeter Butts declared tremblingly. "But I figger it's some kind of new worm or bug. All de niggers has 'em."

"I wonder ef dat's how come I feels so bad?" Figger Bush asked fearfully, pulling at his little shoebrush mustache. "I thought I needed a drink or somepin, but dis writin' says it's a epizootic!"

"No mo' drinks fer you, Figger," Vinegar Atts rumbled. "Ef you figger on havin' any shore hopes of heaven, you better cut it out!"

"I—I—I swears off now!" Figger stuttered, looking at Atts with eyes which nearly popped out of his head.

"All us niggers better refawm," Hitch Diamond declared. "I don't b'lieve prize-fightin' is a fitten occupation fer a nigger about to die!"

"Sellin' booze shorely ain't a heavenly job," Skeeter said sadly. "I never thought 'bout dat befo'."

"Preachin' don't he'p a nigger be as good as I wish it would," Rev. Vinegar Atts lamented. "I's a real mean nigger myse'f!"

"Ef all de niggers in Tickfall dies, whut 'll de white folks do fer wuck-hands?" Figger Bush asked.

"Huh," Hitch Diamond grunted. "No white

man wouldn't miss you! You ain't did a day's wuck sense you wus bawned."

"I wus bawned tired," Figger said defensively. "I's jes' nachelly one of dese set-easy niggers!"

"You better git a hustle on you in yo' las days," Skeeter informed him. "De good Lawd ain't got no use fer lazy folks."

"Us better all git gooder dan we is," Vinegar Atts said positively. "I been tellin' dese Tickfall niggers eve'y Sunday 'bout deir devilmint, but 'tain't done 'em no good. Now it's plum' too late!"

"Naw, Revun, 'tain't too late," Skeeter Butts said earnestly. "I b'lieve us'll all listen to religium advices right now. Don't gib us up—keep on tryin'!"

"Would you wish to he'p me refawm dese niggers?" Atts asked.

"Suttinly," Skeeter said eagerly. "Ef dey don't refawm, I'll shoot daylights through 'em—I—I mean I'll be powerful sorry for 'em."

Skeeter took a big breath, sighed audibly, and wiped the cold sweat from his temples.

"Will you he'p in dis refawm, Hitch?" Vinegar inquired.

"Shore will!" Hitch informed him. "I'll begin on de fust nigger you p'ints out to me. Jes' one religium roun' will be all Hitchie wants—I's de real K. O. con of dis town."

"Dat ain't de right kind of talk to use, Hitch," Vinegar said reprovingly. "You better learn some church-word talk befo' you starts out on dis refawm."

"Dem niggers will git my drift," Hitch declared with conviction.

"Whut refawms is we gwine start?" Skeeter Butts asked.

"Lawd," Figger Bush squeaked. "It's a endless job—look at me for ninstunce!"

"Whut is yo' mos' upsettin' sin, Figger?" Vinegar asked.

Figger meditated for a long time. Then he said:

"So many sins is done got me down dat I don't rickolect which one fust upset me, Revun."

"Aw, don't waste no time on Figger!" Skeeter Butts said disgustedly. "He's a hopeless job!"

"Don't say dat, Skeeter!" Figger pleaded. "You know you is done led me inter all de devilmint I ever done!"

Skeeter gasped like a landed fish.

"Ain't it de truth!" he mourned. "You ain't never had sense enough to be bad by yo'se'f! I shore is made a bad impression on you, Figger—I's awful sorry!"

"Less pass some rules 'bout dis refawm!" Hitch Diamond proposed. "We'll bunch all de sins togedder an' tell de niggers to quit 'em all!"

"Dat's de idear!" Vinegar agreed. "Git me a pencil an' a piece of write-on paper!"

Perfervid advocates of temperance and total abstinence violently proclaim without fear of successful contradiction that in the haunts of the demon rum are hatched out all the iniquitous schemes for the destruction of the morals of the people. Nevertheless, this is the record of the most extensive reform

ever achieved in any community in the United States, and it was born in the Hen-Scratch saloon, in a negro settlement called Dirty-Six, in Tickfall, Louisiana, on a certain day in December.

For two hours the four negroes sweated and fumed, consuming cigarettes, and devising their code of morals. At last Vinegar Atts laid the sheet of paper on the table and they surveyed the result:

No lofen.
No quorlen
No fites.
No kussen.
No drams.
No gamblen.
No steelen.

"My Lawd!" Figger Bush sighed. "Dat takes away all my employments. Ef a nigger cain't do none of dem things he mought as well be dead!"

"You'se gwine be soon enough, Figger," Vinegar Atts reminded him in mournful tones. "Don't go shovin' up dat happenstance by wishin' fer it!"

"'No fites,'" Hitch Diamond read. "Dat puts me outen bizziness."

"I ain't got no job," Skeeter mourned, looking at the paper. "'No drams, no gamblen.'"

"'No lofen,'" Vinegar Atts lamented. "I's a powerful fat nigger to git active right sudden, at my age."

Suddenly Atts sprang to his feet and howled:

"Hol' on, niggers—us needs anodder rule! I adds, 'No cuttin' out church!'"

"'Tain't necessary," Hitch snickered. "You cain't keep de niggers outen chu'ch when terr'ble times comes!"

"I guess us better git out an' succulate dis repote, niggers," Vinegar said when he received this assurance. "Us ain't got any too much time. De Shoofly chu'ch-bell rings to-night at eight o'clock."

The grapevine telephone was promptly put into operation, and in twenty minutes every negro in Tickfall knew that a dreadful and mysterious malady was rife among them, and that death waited just around the corner with a sharp butcher-knife in his hand.

Laughter died in the throats of the most laughter-loving people in the world; the thrumming of the banjo ceased in the cabin; the chatter of care-free women and the shouts of happy pickaninnies sank away into silence; easy-smiling lips took on a pout of distress, and eyes which usually glowed with humor looked into the mystery and the dark of the unknown and were strained and fear-stricken.

Like old hens going to roost, the women began to assemble in the large, barnlike Shoofly church long before dark. The town began to fill up with negroes from the plantations and the swamps, and from every negro settlement in Tickfall, the feet of the negroes made straight paths toward the Shoofly church. The ringing of the church-bell was a signal for the belated to hasten, and the building was packed with people when Vinegar Atts rose and started a hymn. It was an old, familiar tune to them all, and for a moment the great volume of

sound rolled out of the house and thundered into the ears of all the white inhabitants of the town. But as the congregation began to consider the meaning of the words they sang, they appeared ominous with warning and threat, and gradually the voices died away:

Some folks do not believe
Dat a whale could Joner receive;
  But dat don't make my tale at all untrue!
Dar is whales on eve'y side,
Wid deir mouths opened wide,
  An' you better look out or one will swaller you!

Then Vinegar Atts announced:

"Mr. Muskeeter Butts will specify de puppus of dis meetin'!"

Skeeter arose, clawed at his high, white collar so that he could speak without strangling to death, adjusted his enormous cuffs so that he could hold the newspaper, and began in a trembling, squeaky voice:

"Marse John Flournoy gib dis here newspaper to Isaiah Gaitskill. Brudder Isaiah gib it to Revun Vinegar Atts. I reads a piece offen dis here front page."

As Skeeter read, the negroes joined in with a wailing lamentation, which as the fearful news sank into their consciousness became thunderous.

"'Danger! Danger!'" Skeeter read. "'All de niggers in Tickfall about to die!'"

("O Lawd, hab mussy! Dig my grave wid a silber spoon!")

"'A mysterious disease has broken out among the

negroes in Tickfall, result-in' in a num-ber of sud-den death——'"

("Ah-ee. O he'p us! Gwine to die!")

"'De dorctors of de town de-clare dar is no cure—'"

("Jes' plum' 'bleeged an' bound to die!")

All night long the negroes remained packed in the Shoofly church, actually too scared to go home in the dark. Song after song rolled like thunder from the building, a pathetic effort to drown their fears with music. Never had Vinegar Atts been as earnest in his prayers and exhortations, nor had the people of his parish ever before shown such earnestness in their responses. Every man and woman in the church professed religion that night. Never was a reform as instantaneous and as complete.

Along toward day the negroes began to rid themselves of their weapons of sin. Figger Bush came to the front of the congregation with the "jerks" and tremblingly laid upon the top of the table a cheap pistol, a pair of brass knucks, and a deck of greasy, soiled playing cards. His example was contagious, and in a few minutes the table was loaded with cards, whisky bottles, dice, brass knucks, daggers, razors, rabbit feet, and hoodoo-charms of all sorts.

"Cornfess yo' sins!" Vinegar Atts bellowed. "Cornfess up!"

Negroes sprang up all over the house and bawled their iniquities into the ears of the people, but each negro was too intent on thinking of his own transgression to listen to the vices of his fellow, who spoke as a dying man to dying men!

When the rising sun dissolved the last lurking shadow, the all-night revival came to an end in this manner:

Hitch Diamond arose, holding in his hand the sheet of paper which contained the rules of reform devised in the Hen-Scratch saloon.

"I motions befo' we turns out dat all of us promise to keep de rules wroted down on dis paper!" he bellowed.

After he had read the list the congregation unanimously adopted this new code of conduct and dispersed. The people walked home in groups, looking fearfully behind them at intervals, lifting their feet high like turkeys walking through mud, ready at an instant for precipitate flight.

The sudden reform among the negroes of Tickfall caused a sensation among the white people of the village.

As a general thing, a white man was accustomed to spending four days hunting for a negro willing to do half a day's work; he secured promises from ten darkies to "be dar early in de mawnin'." Then he waited ten days, and went out and did the work himself.

But by nine o'clock on this day, the Tickfall bank was crowded with negroes who wished to see Marse Tom Gaitskill about getting a job. Every merchant in the town was beset by applications for labor. Darkies walked from house to house, seeking employment, and every chance pedestrian upon the street was accosted with a greeting which after a

while almost shattered the nerves of the white inhabitants of the village:

"Got any wuck fer a strong, willin' nigger, boss?"

Of course the negroes spoke not a word which would reveal the reason for this sudden increase in industry, and the white people could only observe the amazing results and wonder.

Nearly every lawn in Tickfall held a boy busy with tools, cutting the grass, raking the dead leaves, hoeing out the flower-beds, and mending the fences. White people accustomed to seeing a workman take ten minutes to chop down one weed, and half an hour to light his corn-cob pipe, now observed that all were working with feverish haste, and at the same time with the most minute care and exactness as if it were a religious observance of some sort.

"What ails all these coons in town?" Gaitskill laughed as he looked down the street and saw not a single dusky loafer.

"Christmas is coming!" Flournoy laughed. "Day after to-morrow is Christmas. Had you forgotten?"

"They must expect to draw a prize-package from the white Santa Clauses this year," Gaitskill grinned. "Heretofore they've been jest as lazy before as after."

At that moment Hitch Diamond came around the corner and stopped in front of the Gaitskill store.

"Marse Tom," he said earnestly. "How much do a barrel of lime cost?"

"Not much," Gaitskill said. "Want to whitewash something?"

"Yes, suh; dat is, some yuther niggers do. Us is

got a notion to waste a lot of whitewash on our fences an' cabins."

"I'll give the niggers all the lime they need," Gaitskill said promptly. "Tell 'em to come to this store and get it free!"

Hitch Diamond turned and walked hastily down the street. In the next half hour he paid a call at every cabin in all the negro settlements of Tickfall. He pounded on each cabin door with his iron fist, and when the door was opened he entered and looked around.

"How many niggers lives in dis cabin?" he asked. "How many of dat gang is got 'um a job?"

When he found a negro who had no employment, he swept down upon him with all the righteous fury of a prophet of old.

"Whut ails you, nigger? Don't you know you's gwine to die? Git ready! Git ready! Go to Marse Tom Gaitskill's sto' an' tell dem white men to gib you a bucket of lime an' a white-wash brush. Den you white dis cabin, inside an' out, an' put whut's lef' on dis ole rickety, busted-down fence! Fix de fence up, too!"

At noon, when Gaitskill passed his store on the way to lunch, a clerk ran out and said:

"Colonel, do you really mean for us to give all that lime away? The niggers have carried away forty barrels of whitewash in the last two hours!"

Gaitskill emitted a sharp whistle of surprise. He scratched his head a moment, then grinned:

"It's all right, Frank. Let 'em have it. Christmas is coming!"

Rev. Vinegar Atts found himself overwhelmed with work. The sudden change in the moral life of his parishioners made a demand upon his services every moment of that busy day. Sick people, who could not come to the church, sent for him to come to see them. Prayer-meetings were held in many of the cabins. A constant stream of people moved in and out of the Shoofly church, and their singing and shouting could be heard for a mile.

"Git ready to die! Git ready to die!" Vinegar bawled from house to house. "De ancestors will git you ef you don't watch out!"

Under Hitch Diamond's direction, all the negro settlements were being whitewashed. Under Vinegar Atts's admonition the cabins were swept out, the yards were cleaned, the cabins were aired, and every scrap of paper and every particle of trash was gathered up and burned. These were not original ideas with the negroes. They had been taught this in the fever epidemic, when a government health officer had had charge of the sanitary work of the village.

The village began to fill up with strange darkies who had come in from the plantations and the swamp.

"Whut you coons doin' here?" Vinegar Atts demanded of a bunch of them.

"Us come in whar de dorctors kin git to us easy," one of them answered nervously. "Word wus sont dat all de niggers is about to die!"

"Dat's right!" Vinegar bellowed. "But whut sort of sight will you coons be when you is dead—mud all over yo' britches an' no socks on? Git busy

and clean up! Go down to de bayou an' take a wash —buy you a clean shu't an' some socks—git ready to die!"

Skeeter Butts sat alone in the Hen-Scratch saloon. He was the only idler in Tickfall, a compulsory idler, for the reform had put him out of business. The sound of the fiddle and the banjo was heard no more. Laughter and shouting had ceased. Not a negro entered his barroom, and most of his regular customers passed on the other side of the street. Skeeter sat in front of his saloon all day in mournful and fearful loneliness.

Then, just at dark, he had the surprise of his life.

Three men came up the street and stopped, talked for a moment in low tones, then entered the saloon on tiptoe and came to where Skeeter was sitting behind the bar.

"Us is a committee to wait on you, Skeeter," Vinegar Atts said in funereal tones.

"Whut is I done?" Skeeter asked in a frightened voice.

"'Tain't whut you done; it's whut you ain't done," Vinegar informed him. "You done showed yo'se'f de one sinner in Tickfall."

"How come?" Skeeter asked.

Vinegar Atts produced the paper on which he had written the "Rules of Reform" in that very room the day before. He handed the paper to Skeeter.

"Whut do de fust rule say, Skeeter?" he demanded.

"'No lofen,'" Skeeter read tremblingly.

Vinegar Atts placed a heavy hand upon the shoulder of the barkeeper and bawled:

"Whut is you done fer a livin' to-day, nigger?"

"Nothin'," Skeeter stammered. "I—it 'pears like you-all is done put me outside of a job. I ain't had no customers to-day."

"You been loafin'," Hitch Diamond proclaimed in a pugnacious voice. "How does you especk to git to heaven when you die? Don't you know de ancestors will get you befo' mawnin'?"

"Less don't gib de ancestors no show at him," Figger Bush squealed. Figger was covered with whitewash, had done his first day's work for years, and was feeling righteous. "Less hang him to a tree an' larn him a lesson!"

"Hol' on, fellers!" Skeeter begged earnestly. "I didn't ketch on 'bout dis rule. I figgered dat a nigger whut had a job oughter stay on it. De Tickfall niggers all j'ined de refawm, but I thought I oughter stay on my job so I could sell booze to de coons from de swamp an' de plantations. But none of 'em didn't buy!"

"You git outen dis sinful saloon an' go to wuck," Hitch howled, shaking his hamlike fist under Skeeter's nose, "or I'll bust yo' fool neck!"

"Yo' intentions is good, Hitch," Vinegar Atts said reprovingly; "but you is done busted rule two whut says 'no quorlin',' an' you mighty nigh fractioned rule number three whut specifies 'no fightin'"!"

"I—er—uh—Skeeter knows I ain't mean no harm," Hitch murmured painfully. "I jes' said dat because I loves him. I'd druther bust his neck dan not hab him foller along atter us when us goes to heaben.'

"I'll git good," Skeeter said meekly. "I'll see

Marse John Flournoy as soon as it's good daylight to-morrer."

"Better not pesticate Marse John, Skeeter," Figger Bush advised him. "He tole me dat de nex' nigger whut axed him fer a job wus flirtin' wid a hearse!"

"Whut kin I do?" Skeeter lamented. "Dar uster be mo' free jobs dan willin' niggers; now dar's mo' niggers dan jobs."

"Ef you cain't wuck fer somebody else, wuck, for yo'se'f," Vinegar Atts advised him. "Git a scrub-brush an' slop-bucket an' scour out dis here saloom. Git a sack of lime an' whitewash it! Dis house belongs to Sheriff Flournoy, an' he'll remember you kind when you is goned hencefo'th an' ain't never no mo'!"

"I'll shore do it!" Skeeter assured them.

Having accomplished their mission, the committee then sat down and became sociable over Skeeter's cigarettes. When they had smoked for a while Skeeter suddenly asked:

"Revun Atts, whut is de lates' news from de epizootic?"

"I ain't heerd nothin'," Atts replied. "Of co'se, I ain't gwine aroun' beggin' fer de pest-wagon by axin' de white folks no fool questions!"

"Whut do de papers say?" Skeeter persisted.

"Dunno."

"I bet you some of dem papers is got a heap mo' in 'em 'bout de disease dan de papers us niggers got to read," Figger Bush proclaimed.

"Huh!" Vinegar Atts exclaimed. "I never thunk

of dat! Of co'se, de white folks ain't gwine print all de news fer a nigger."

"Dey don't divide up nothin' else even," Hitch Diamond said. "I motions dat Skeeter Butts be 'p'inted a committee to visit all de white folks' houses an' colleck up deir old Tickfall *Whoopses* so us kin git de lates' news."

"I'll do it," Skeeter said uneasily; "but I ain't gwine tell 'em whut I wants wid de papers. I'll specify dat I wants 'em to cover some shelves in de Hen-Scratch."

"Start soon in de mawnin', Skeeter," Atts admonished him. "We'll meet you here at dinner-time an' read up—mebbe all de niggers on de plantations is dead an' us don't know it. I's seed a whole passel of buzzards sailin' aroun' to-day!"

The committee moved on, visiting from house to house, admonishing each occupant who had not observed all the rules of reform, just as the white men had done years before during the fever epidemic.

Then a totally unexpected thing happened.

The next day being Christmas Eve, every negro in Tickfall lost his job at noon. All business places were closed, and every man went home to get a good start for the Christmas celebration. Several hundred negroes found themselves with a half-day of idleness confronting them. They cut all the weeds on the streets in all the negro settlements, burned all the trash, put four coats of whitewash on the Shoofly church, mended all the fences, tore down several unsightly shacks which had been decaying in the sun for half a century, dug ditches to drain their

communities, and ceased their work at dark to get supper and assemble in their church, where Vinegar Atts later confronted more work-weary parishioners then he had ever seen before.

In the midst of their evening service Skeeter Butts arrived, carrying a bundle of papers almost as large as himself, which he placed upon a table in front of the pulpit desk.

This incident was sensational in itself, promising all sorts of fearful possibilities; but the congregation received its greatest jolt when it beheld the Rev. Dr. Sentelle crippling slowly up the aisle behind Skeeter, leaning heavily upon his eleven-pound walking stick.

Dr. Sentelle was the lion of Tickfall, beloved and magnified by whites and blacks. He was a man of influence and power for miles around. Intense courage glowed in his eyes, which held smoldering flames like the eyes of a jungle beast; tenderness, gentleness, sweetness, and love, love, love were etched in the map of his pain-wrinkled face like an illuminated missal by Bellini; and his beautiful voice was as sweet as music, every spoken word caressing like a woman's hand.

"Bless Gawd!" Vinegar Atts bellowed at sight of the white clergyman. "I capsizes right now in favor of de Revun Dr. Sentelle. He's gwine fotch us a Chris'mus message!"

The entire congregation rose to their feet. Vinegar Atts trotted half-way down the aisle and met the cripple. With a murmur of thanks, the white man placed his delicate, blue-veined hand in the crotch of

Vinegar's powerful arm and stumbled slowly, feebly forward to the pulpit platform. When he had seated himself the negroes sank quietly back upon the benches.

In the meantime all the business men in Tickfall were holding a meeting in the rear of the Tickfall bank.

"I propose a basket of grub for every nigger cabin in town!" Gaitskill proclaimed as he sat at the head of the table. "We have no poor whites in this village, but the negroes are always hungry."

There was a unanimous murmur of assent.

Then Gaitskill laughed.

"By the way, what has happened to set all the coons to cleaning up? I've been too dang liberal with my benefactions—I'm short sixty-two barrels of lime!"

"Christmas is coming!" several voices murmured, and there were many nodding heads, and a broad grin passed around the table.

"Say, fellers," Sheriff Flournoy grinned, rising to his feet and taking a newspaper from his pocket, "er —ah—I beg pardon, are we through with business?"

"Sure!" Gaitskill smiled. "We're agreed that the niggers get the grub."

"I started a little joke in town the other day," Flournoy went on.

Then he explained about the article he had written, and read it aloud to them.

There was a whoop of laughter, after which one asked:

"Did you get results?"

"No," Flournoy said disgustedly. "I ought not to have started it with old Isaiah Gaitskill—he's about half-witted."

"By George!" Gaitskill exclaimed, springing to his feet. "That accounts for all this cleaning up and whitewash—the niggers are expecting an epidemic of disease and are getting ready to die!"

Perfect silence greeted this announcement as its full significance dawned upon each man. Then Dr. Moseley, the parish health officer, spoke earnestly:

"Gentlemen, let us not say one word to the contrary. Let the darkies clean up and keep clean!"

"I have done good by stealth and blush to find it fame!" Flournoy interrupted mockingly.

"It means health, gentlemen," Dr. Moseley declared. "Health and long life to us all—er—by the way, I propose that as a toast right now!"

For nearly forty years Gaitskill had held this meeting in the rear of his bank on every Christmas Eve. The men were familiar with his custom, and the physician's suggestion met with instant response.

Gaitskill rose, unlocked his desk, pushed back the top, and the men gazed with lively anticipation upon the glasses and decanters there concealed.

"Hitch!" Gaitskill called. "Oh, Hitch Diamond! Come here!"

There was no answer. Hitch had long before deserted the colonel and gone to the Shoofly church.

"I bet that coon answers promptly to-morrow morning," Gaitskill laughed as he grumblingly filled the glasses.

"Christmas is coming!" a laughing chorus murmured.

Suddenly there was a shout which rolled like thunder over Tickfall, the sound permeating even the thick walls of the Tickfall bank.

"Listen to the niggers!" Flournoy grinned.

There was a moment's silence; then the mighty ululations of a negro song floated to them on the wings of the wind. The men arose.

"Health and long life to us all!" Dr. Moseley repeated.

"To us all!" the men murmured with nodding heads. Then they drank.

Time inevitably weakens all reforms. It robs the greatest and most imminent danger of its terror. And time completely overthrew the reform in Tickfall and so endowed the negroes with courage that any timid darky would have tickled the whiskers of a bearcat with the end of his flat nose.

The time required to accomplish this relapse was one day—the day which comes but once a year—Christmas!

The day found every negro in Tickfall in a receptive mood. As a result, every white man in the town had the privilege of a few moments' conversation with all the blacks in the town some time during the day.

The sun-slashed streets of Tickfall were filled with them, moving to and fro, like ants in a hill, all feverish in their activity, and all so shoutingly happy that the town was as noisy as a parrot's cage.

Their order of advance was something like this:

a The servants of the household.
b Those who had been servants during the year.
c Servants of former years.
d Those who had done odd jobs.
e Those whose names the white man knew.
f Those who knew the white man's name.
g All the other niggers in town.

And each white man had supplied himself with about half a barrel of cheap candy, three or four bunches of bananas, a barrel of apples, a hatful of small change, and a supply of tobacco, cigars, plugs, and snuff, bestowing these gifts according to his inclination.

The first ceremony of the day was the formal distribution of the eggnog to the servants of the household.

Of course, after Hitch Diamond, Vinegar Atts, Figger Bush, and the rest of our colored friends had spent three days in a frightful ride upon the water-wagon, their repeated visits to the homes of their Tickfall white friends where the eggnog foamed like the surf of the sea had a most demoralizing effect.

In fact, Hitch Diamond and Vinegar Atts called upon Marse Tom Gaitskill and made themselves such nuisances that Gaitskill locked them both up in an empty corn-crib and turned the water-hose on them.

Death had no terrors for these people on Christmas Day.

"Huh!" Hitch Diamond bellowed. "I wouldn't be skeart to-day even ef de Revun Dr. Sentelle hadn't made us such a purty speech. I done separated my idears from my habits!"

"I ain't skeart, neider!" Vinegar Atts whooped. "Nobody ain't gwine pat me in de face wid a spadeful of dirt!"

Christmas baskets came to every cabin; pickaninnies ran the streets, their pockets filled with pennies, and their hats laden with oranges, bananas, and cheap candy; children, white and black, cluttered up the few asphalt pavements with every sort of Christmas toys, until the careless pedestrian was in danger of tripping over some contraption and breaking every leg he had; and negro women gadded the streets dressed in finery which was very suggestive to the white folks of dresses they had seen earlier in the year in the drawing-rooms of their women.

By nightfall the Hen-Scratch saloon was filled with negro men, all perfectly sober, and all laughing, and all happy beyond the dreams of angels.

Figger Bush thrummed a banjo; Pap Curtain had a fiddle; Mustard Prophet blew a cornet; while every man exhausted the vocal treasury of his throat for sounds to add to the volume of music:

I's as crazy as a loon,
Fer I gib a silber spoon
To a yeller she-coon,
  On dis here Chris'mus day.
But a white woman owned it,
An' said she never loaned it,
  An' de cotehouse kotch me right away!

Vinegar Atts pushed through the crowd, shaking hands cordially, smiling like a big, fat baby, and bellowing his congratulations:

"Merry Chris'mus, niggers! Us is done fell from amazin' grace to a floatin' opportunity!"

"Bless Gawd!" Skeeter Butts squealed. "I's shore glad us ain't refawmed no more! Less all j'ine hands in a circuous-ring an' sing dat good ole favoryte toon, 'De Star-Spangled Banana'!"

"Naw!" Vinegar Atts bawled. "We is done loss all our good sense! Less go an' pay our manners to de white folks!"

"Lead de way! Lead de way!" a chorus of voices answered. "Us follers right at yo' hip!"

Weep and howl, ye dwellers in the East and West and North, because ye were not in Tickfall on that Christmas night! Your negroes have cast aside the supreme gifts which make us love them in the South —humor, pathos, laughter, and music!

You listen to your phonographs and try to imagine what real music is like; you go to grand opera and think you hear it; but reserve your judgment until you hear a marching column of negro men, each of their throats having the range and capacity of a pipe-organ, and all of their songs set to a sweet minor, which is characteristic of the music of all enslaved people since that far distant day when the whip-driven Israelites "hung their harps on the willows."

On the Christmas following the close of the Civil War, the impoverished white people of Tickfall sent Christmas baskets to their ex-slaves, who were as poor and hungry as themselves. That night those

ex-slaves, as an expression of their gratitude to their old masters, formed in a body and walked from house to house, singing the songs of the old plantation days. White women came out upon the porticoes, leaned their quivering shoulders against the big columns, and wept uncontrollably in memory of other and happier days.

White men stumped out upon those same porches with crutches and canes, or with wooden legs, and listening, visualized the smoke-fogged battlefields, the blood-drenched ground, the clash and onsets of the great war, and beyond the acrid smoke of that holocaust they beheld a magnificent civilization which rose in beauty like a dream, and then vanished forever more. For over half a century this custom had been observed every Christmas. It survived the horrors of the Reconstruction Era when Northern carpet-baggers sought to lead the black race astray and turn them against their former masters.

And now that marching column had formed again, two hundred strong, two abreast, with Vinegar Atts and Hitch Diamond in the lead.

All over Tickfall the white people were waiting for this, the day's supreme event. The negroes knew the favorite songs of all the older citizens. Rev. Dr. Sentelle listened to "Dixie," and "Jesus Lover of my Soul." Bowing his acknowledgments, Dr. Sentelle said:

"Boys, when I die, I want you to sing both of those songs at my funeral!"

And a few years later they did it!

Marse Tom Gaitskill, being a Kentuckian, listened

to "My Old Kentucky Home," and to "Darling Nellie Gray"——

Oh, my eyes are getting blinded, and I cannot see my way;
Hark! There's somebody knocking at the door.
I hear the angels calling, and I see my Nellie Gray,
Farewell to my old Kentucky shore!

Leaving one house to go to another, the negroes always broke into some rollicking plantation melody, singing it on the way, so that their pilgrimage was a pilgrimage of song. At the end of the town, remote from all the negro settlements, was the home of the sheriff, Mr. John Flournoy, so that the negroes came to his residence last.

They marched melodiously into his yard, spread out over the lawn, taking care to trample down none of the flowers and shrubs, and their mighty voices reverberated through the valleys and from the hill-tops, and could literally be heard for miles.

Mr. John Flournoy and his gracious wife stood upon the portico, sometimes smiling, sometimes with serious faces and moist eyes, as they listened to the old melodies which had colored the very fiber of their souls.

Finally a hush fell upon the crowd, and Mr. Flournoy thought the time for his speech had come. But not so.

Vinegar Atts stepped forward within a few feet of the porch steps, removed his battered slouch hat, and began:

"Marse John, all us niggers is been singing to you-

all white folks ever sense we warn't more'n hawn-high to a billy-goat. We remembers all dem happy Chris'mus times of yuther years, an' we wish we could keep up dis music eve'y Chris'mus till ole Gabriel blows his hawn. But de time is done come when us muss tell you good-by, an' you won't never hear our singin' no more!"

"Lawd hab mussy!" a chorus of men's voices sounded like a prayer.

"You is done been a good frien' to all us po' niggers, Marse John," Vinegar went on earnestly. "We hates to go away an' leave you——"

The negroes had begun to "weave," and a moaning sound issued from every throat like a great organ tone, and the light of the full moon casting the shadows of the trees upon the upturned faces of the men, made an effect funereal and impressive indeed.

"What the devil are you talking about?" Flournoy demanded in a voice which was almost a scream.

"Us is gittin' ready to die, Marse John," Vinegar told him. "De paper is done printed de word about all de niggers havin' dat new kind of epizootic, an' you rickoleck when de yeller fever kotch us niggers all of us fell right down in de middle of de big road an' died!"

Vinegar took a worn and ragged newspaper out of his pocket, unfolded it carefully, and handed it to Sheriff Flournoy. It was one of the copies of the Tickfall *Whoop* which Flournoy had given to old Isaiah Gaitskill several days before.

"You kin read whut de paper says yo'se'f, Marse John," Vinegar said.

That was one time in Mr. John Flournoy's life when he wished himself to be somewhere else immediately. He was an inveterate practical joker, but he was as tender-hearted as a woman, and it appalled him that he had administered this wound to his negro friends on this happiest day of the year.

"Boys," he said painfully, "this article is not true —it is a joke! Somebody has been trying to scare you!"

"Who played dat joke on us, Marse John?" Vinegar Atts asked.

Flournoy took thirty seconds to consider his answer to that question, realizing as never before how very much the truth hurts, when you have to tell it!

"I did it!" he answered, and the words strangled in his throat.

There was one minute of perfect silence.

Then Vinegar Atts replied with just two words:

"Ye-es, suh!"

Slowly he turned and started toward the street, Hitch Diamond walking beside him. Two and two, the crowd of negroes silently fell into line and marched out.

Skeeter Butts was the last to leave.

As Skeeter started through the gate he felt Flournoy's heavy hand upon his shoulder and winced.

"Tell me the truth, you little yeller devil!" Flournoy drawled. "Didn't you niggers know all the time that that was a joke?"

Skeeter chuckled evasively. He had no intention of revealing a secret of the most secretive race in the world; least of all did he intend to make trouble

between the white folks by revealing the fact that Dr. Sentelle, pitying the fright and ignorance of the negroes, had investigated, learned the facts, and informed them.

But the sheriff's hand upon his shoulder was suggestive of the majesty and might of the law, and Skeeter had a mortal fear of getting, as he would have expressed it, "into a lawsuit wid de cotehouse."

"Yes, suh," Skeeter chuckled. "We did learn a leetle about dat befo' Chris'mus. We borrowed a lot of papers from de white folks an' didn't see nothin' about it in deir papers, so us soupspicioned dat you had done got up a buzzo on us. But us is all Christians, Marse John—we don't bear you no grudge!"

Then he slipped from the hand of the law and ran laughing down the street.

A Mascot Jinx

"Dis here cullud lady is gwine be my wife. I make you 'quainted wid Coco Ferret!"

Love had flushed the saddle-colored face of Skeeter Butts to a brownish-crimson, and the gorgeous splendor of his clothes reflected the sunburst of affection in his heart.

Hitch Diamond held out his hand to a fat, dumpy, simple-faced country negro girl, and grinned.

"Huh," he chuckled, as Coco Ferret shook hands, "dis here gal is all soft and puffed-up an' squeezy like a big balloom."

"Dat's right," Skeeter grinned, eying the girl with a prideful gaze. "I likes 'em dat way. Edgecated niggers is too slim an' active. Dey gits biggity an' bumptious. Dey axes 'terrogations an' is bawn to trouble."

"Dis lady oughter make a good-pervidin' cook an' housekeeper," Hitch suggested, looking her over as if she were a horse which Skeeter had bought.

"I shore is bofe dem things," the girl responded. "Skeeter ain't gittin' no set-easy gal."

"I hopes you'll bofe be as happy as married niggers ever is," Hitch remarked politely.

"Happy is our name, Hitch," Skeeter declared

confidently. "Dis here gal is already fotch me luck, an' I's gwine use her fer our mascop in de ball game to-day."

"Whut is de word about de game, Skeeter?" Hitch grunted. "Is us gwine win?"

"Suttinly," Skeeter declared. "I done bet fawty dollars. Coco is bet ten dollars. I b'lieves in bettin' all I kin git."

"Dem Sawtown niggers is powerful pert players, Skeeter," Hitch warned him. "Dey wucks reg'lar in de big sawmill, an' dey got plenty muscle an' wind. Dey plays baseball all day on eve'y Sunday, an' dey keeps in fine practice. Dey all 'pears like new-issue niggers to me—slick-heads, plum' full of tricks, an' dangersome."

Skeeter turned and looked over the picnic grounds where a number of husky blacks were prancing around with the women. They all wore their baseball suits, and these uniforms drew the women like a barrel of sugar attracts flies.

"Yes, suh, I admits dem facks," Skeeter said. "But look at de baseball team us is got—Figger Bush is de best pitcher in Loozanny; Prince Total ketches; Mustard Prophet straddles fust base—us is been playin' all summer, an' we is winned eve'y game up to now!"

"Dat's so," Hitch remarked, with less uneasiness in his voice. "I reckin I'll bet eve'y dollar dat I'm got."

"Dat's de talk," Skeeter applauded. "I been pussuadin' all de players on de Tickfall team to bet all de money dey had."

"Dat ain't good bizziness," Hitch declared. "Ef players bets deir own dollars an' de team is losin', dey all gits rattled."

"Mebbe so, wid white folks," Skeeter replied. "But 'tain't so wid niggers. You know how niggers is—ef dey think de yuther man is gwine lose money on deir wuck, dey don't pay no mind, an' de Lawd's will kin be did. But ef a nigger figgers dat he's gwine lose money on his own se'f—Lawdy, he shore do scratch gravel!"

Their conversation was brought to a close by a long blast upon a fox-horn.

"Dat means de picnic dinner is sot," Skeeter interpreted. "Us better hurry or all dem yuther niggers will wollop up de grub."

As they took their places at the long table where the food was piled up in an appalling and unappetizing mass, Vinegar Atts bellowed:

"Who is de she-queen you is armin' aroun', Skeeter?"

"Dis here is my gwine-be wife," Skeeter grinned. "Her name's Coco."

"It's 'bout time you wus gittin' married an' sottled down," Rev. Vinegar Atts proclaimed, scenting a wedding fee. "Den you'll be king of de coconut tree. Ef you puts off gettin' married too long, you gits outen de habit of wantin' to be."

"Me an' Coco is got de same mind now," Skeeter snickered, proud of the attention they were attracting. "Coco is de mascop at de ball game dis afternoon."

At the far end of the table the manager of the

Sawtown team heard this last remark and uttered an exclamation. Stepping over to one of his players he asked:

"Buff'lo, how come us fergot to fetch a mascop along wid us?"

"Dunno, cap," Buffalo replied. "I got my rabbit's foot."

"Dem Tickfall coons is got a woman fer a mascop," the manager said. "An dey got Figger Bush fer a pitcher, an' Prince Total ketches. Dat powerful arrangement shore looks bad to me."

"Why don't us hoodoo Figger?" Buffalo inquired.

"How is dat did?" Manager Star asked eagerly.

"Make a cross on Figger's head wid a rabbit foot," Buffalo informed him.

"Dat's easy," Star grinned. "Gimme yo' foot, Buff'lo."

Ten minutes later the Sawtown manager sidled up to Figger Bush and remarked:

"You gotter pitch hard dis atternoon, Figger. I thinks you needs some nourishment. I gives you dis big, yeller awange as a peace-off'rin'."

As Figger, grinning, reached out for the orange, Star let it fall from his hand and roll under the table. Figger went down on his hands and knees, crawled under the table for his gift, and when he came out felt some sharp object scraped across his woolly scalp. When he stood up he beheld Manager Star grinning at him, holding up a mangy rabbit foot.

"Sawtown wins de game to-day, Figger," Star snickered. "I done cross yo' head wid a rabbit foot, an' luck ain't wid yo' no mo'."

Figger Bush turned almost white.

As Star walked away, Figger turned every pocket in his clothes wrong side out, found every cent of money he had in his possession, and crammed it into his mouth. Stooping down, he made a cross in the sand with his middle finger, drew a large ring around the cross, and dropped the money out of his mouth into the center of the ring. Then from under each coin he gathered a tiny pinch of dirt, placed it in the palm of his left hand, turned around three times with his eyes closed, and tossed the grains of dirt over his head.

Thus he hoped to break the hoodoo. But uneasiness filled his soul.

"My Gawd," he sighed. "I shore feels powerful bad."

At two o'clock that afternoon four hundred negroes stood around the baseball diamond and cheered the Tickfall team as they went to the field and the Sawtown visitors went to bat.

Figger Bush, the famous Tickfall pitcher, rubbed his hands with dirt, tightened his belt, took a chew of tobacco, waved one foot in the air, and pitched his first ball. Kerplunk! It landed in the stomach of the Sawtown batter, doubled him up, and dropped him in a heap on top of the plate.

Two delighted, grinning, Sawtown teammates caught the injured man by the arms, lifted him, and escorted him to first base, enlivening their progress down the line by directing to Figger Bush certain remarks which were calculated to reduce his self-esteem to the minimum.

The second batter hit the first ball, sent it far over in the high weeds back of center field; then he and the injured teammate loped leisurely into home.

"Git yo' eye steady, Figger!" Butts squealed. "Don't let 'em rattle you up!"

"Figger, Figger, he's de nigger!" the Sawtown men bawled. "We done got dat nigger's figger!"

Once more Bush wound up to pitch the ball, but the moment he brought his arm back for the whiplike throw, the ball slipped out of his fingers, rolled weakly across the diamond, and was retrieved by the third-baseman.

Every member of the Sawtown team sprang into the air, emitted ecstatic whoops, and plastered the helpless Figger with every name in their vocabulary which they thought would stick.

When Bush finally threw the ball it went over the plate ten feet in the air, and a giggling batboy chased it until it struck against a stump on the edge of the bayou and stopped.

"Oh, Figger!" Skeeter screamed, with a sob in his voice. "Whut's de matter, pardner? Whut ails ye? I got my dollars on ye, Figger; buck up, fer Gawd's sake——"

Bush's answer was a pitched ball which struck the ground three feet in front of the plate, bounced waist-high to the batter, and was slugged far over in the left field, where it fell in a slough, and the fielder had to wade in the muck to his knees to get it.

"You're all right, Figger!" the Sawtown players shrieked. "You suits us fine! Don't let Skeeter Butts git yo' goat!"

Figger's eyes twitched, his jaws worked on his tobacco quid like a mill, his knees grew weak and wabbly. He wound up to throw the ball, then suddenly stopped his operations, straightened up, and felt at the top of his head as if something had hit him.

He threw four balls in rapid succession, not one of which came within ten feet of the plate, and the batter walked to the first.

He threw another ball, hit the batter on the elbow, and he walked to first.

He threw another ball, the batter tapped it, and it dropped at the feet of Figger Bush.

Figger wiped the bitter sweat out of both eyes, stooped down with great deliberation, picked up the ball, wiped the dust off of it on his ragged shirt, and threw it to first just as the three Sawtown men came over the home plate!

"Keep it up, ole boy!" the Sawtown men screamed. "You kin do it—you got us all guessin'—make us run de bases—dat's de right boy!"

"Oh, fer de Lawd's sake, Figger," Skeeter squealed, "see ef you cain't pitch jes' one straight ball! Don't put nothin' on it—jes' throw it straight an' easy!"

Figger threw it straight and easy. A child could have hit it with a lead-pencil. What the batter did to that ball will never be known. It sailed over the top of the highest trees like a bird, and is lying hidden in the Dorfoche woods yet. Then this colored Ty Cobb walked around the bases and sat down on the home plate, conversing in the meantime with Figger Bush with choice language.

Prince Total threw aside his mask and chest-

protector and walked down to the pitcher's box just as the umpire tossed out a new ball.

"Figger, you is de wust pitcher I ever seen!" Prince howled. "You git up dar an' ketch, an' lemme see kin I fan dese niggers out. My Gawd, you muss be crippled under yo' hat to play ball like you is doin'!"

"I is," Figger replied, rubbing his woolly scalp like a man in a dream.

Skeeter Butts left the coaching line, ran into the crowd, and seized Coco Ferret by a fat arm.

"Come on outen dis crowd, honey!" he squeaked. "Oh, Lawdy, ef you never done no mascoppin' before, you git to doin' it now! Dis is awful!"

"How is mascoppin' done, Skeeter?" she inquired as the little darky dragged her out of the crowd.

"Gawd knows!" Skeeter panted as he led her out to where all the Tickfall team could see her from the field. "You jes' nachelly be it—like a luck charm."

Then he turned to the players and howled:

"I done got yo' mascop out in front, Prince! Look at dis pretty nigger gal an' pick up a brave heart! Set yo' eye on Coco and do yo' durndest! Don't let nothin' skeer you, Prince, fer good luck's done busted right in yo' face!"

Prince Total, thus admonished, retired the Sawtown nine with only three pitched balls. Each batter knocked a fly which was caught in the field.

The Tickfall nine was suddenly jubilant. Four hundred Tickfall fans bellowed with joy. Skeeter Butts ran to Coco Ferret, threw his arms around her, an' giggled:

"Oh, you little, fat mascop! You done bust de bad luck! Eve'y nigger in dis town loves you like a brudder —an' me, you done winned my heart ferever an' ever!"

When the Tickfall team came in to bat, Hitch Diamond puffed through the crowd like a steam-engine and started a row.

"Whut de debbil you mean by throwin' dis game, Figger?" he howled in irate tones. "Whut de trouble wid yo' head? Don't you know you is losin' yo' own good money?"

"Trouble?" Figger Bush bawled. "Dem Sawtown niggers done put a hoodoo sign on me!"

"How come?" Hitch asked in a changed tone.

"Dey crisscrossed my head wid a rabbit foot."

"My Gawd!" Hitch howled, and his eyes looked scared. "Why ain't you stood pigeontoed when you pitched, Figger? Dat'd bust de sign."

"Shut up, Hitch!" Pap Curtain snarled as he came into the crowd. "You stop lowratin' dat Figger Bush. I done made inquirements, an' I foun' out dat all dem Sawtown coons is got a buzzard's feather in deir hat an' snake-dust in deir shoes, an' a raw pertater in deir pocket. Dey done sot deir triggers fer luck, and dey got all de rabbit foots in Sawtown hung roun' deir necks!"

"My Lawd!" mourned Skeeter Butts, "dem niggers hadn't oughter did us dataway."

"Of co'se, I couldn't do nothin'!" Figger Bush declared defensively. "Eve'y time I picked up dat ball it begun to claw at de inside of my hand jes' like I wus holdin' a live Jume bug!"

"Dat's right!" Prince Total agreed. "Ef dem fust three balls I pitched hadn't fotch dem niggers out, I never could 'a' tossed anodder over dat plate. Dat ball's got de slickments, an' wiggles like a live snake!"

"Shore!" the fielders agreed with awed voices. "Somepin shore ails dat ball—dey muss hab rubbed it wid eel-juice!"

Skeeter Butts listened to this with ever decreasing hopes of victory for the team.

"Lawdymussy, niggers!" he sighed helplessly. "Think of all de dollars we is losin'. Ain't dar no way to cross dem Sawtown hoodoo signs?"

"Us might try it," Hitch Diamond said as he dived his hand into his pocket for his lucky charms. "Less dec'rate de fust batter wid all our luck pieces!"

"Batter up!" the umpire bawled for the tenth time.

Thereupon Prince Total went to bat, stuffing things in his pockets until they bulged like the pockets of a boy who had been on a visit to an apple orchard. He had rabbits' feet and buzzards' feathers, iron rings and iron bolts, buckeyes and raw potatoes, rattlesnake rattles and birds' claws, teeth of horses and tusks of hogs, locks of hair and four-leaf clovers, rings and chains and rubber bands, beer-checks and copper pennies—a veritable witch's brew of trifles.

Standing at the plate with all this equipment of luck, he bunted the ball to the feet of the shortstop, started to first base carrying his bat, tangled the bat up between his legs, fell on his head, and scat-

tered his luck-charms all over that part of the diamond

A loud groan went up from the throats of the spectators, and Prince got up, picked up his scattered trinkets, placing them in his hat, and laid them at the feet of Skeeter Butts with a sheepish grin.

"I had too many of dem things, fellers," he explained. "Too much luck is more'n a plenty. I couldn't tote it all!"

Then Figger Bush fanned wildly at two balls, shut his eyes and took a lick at the third, hit himself on his own shin with the bat, and came limping back, nursing his crippled leg, and muttering profane things.

In the meanwhile Skeeter had loaded down Mustard Prophet with all the hoodoo charms which Figger had carried and a large assortment which Hitch had accumulated by solicitation among the fans. They were in his shoes, in his belt, in his cap, in his shirt; he rubbed snake-dust on his hands, sprinkled magic powder on his woolly head, and went to bat as uneasy as a condemned criminal facing the electric chair.

"Lam de ball, Mustard!" Skeeter howled. "Put some ginger on de bat, Mustard! You's puffeckly safe—you done crossed de hoodoo sign on 'em! I's prayin' fer you, Mustard!"

Skeeter's prayers were not answered.

Mustard saw the first ball coming and jumped ten feet away. He struck at the second ball after it was in the catcher's mitt, and he struck twice at the third ball—once while the pitcher was winding up

and again when the ball was forty feet from the plate. Then he walked back to Skeeter, delivered of all his lucky pieces, and joined the Tickfall team on its way to the field.

Then Vinegar Atts walked up and laid his hand on Skeeter's shoulder.

"Looky here, Skeeter!" he bellowed. "All us niggers is losin' our dollars on dis here game! I b'lieves dat dis game has been fixed!"

"'Tain't so, Elder," Skeeter denied tearfully. "I done bet fawty dollars on dis game, an' I's gwine lose eve'y cent of dat an' ten dollars dat my gal bet!"

"Whut ails dis Tickfall team?" Vinegar wanted to know.

"Dem Sawtowners done got de hoodoo sign on 'em," Skeeter explained. "I tried to bust de hoodoo when us wus at bat, but it cain't be did."

Vinegar shook his fat fist at the face of Butts.

"I tells you dis, solemn an' specific, Skeeter: dese here cullud pussons is bet deir few money on yo' recommend. Dey don't figger on no hoodoo or no nothin'! Ef you done gone an' fixed dis game, all I gotter say is, you better unhoodoo our team befo' dis crowd of coons make up deir minds whut dey gwine do to you fer sellin' us out to de Sawtowners!"

Vinegar Atts walked away with a majestic air, and Skeeter Butts sat down on the ground beside Coco Ferret, wiping the copious sweat from his face.

"O Lawd," he prayed, "ef I only but had a jinx!"

"Whut am a jinx, Skeeter?" Coco inquired.

"It's a cross-eyed female woman," Skeeter declared, looking at Coco hopefully. But Coco's eyes

were round as a buckshot and straight, perfectly straight.

With a groan Skeeter placed his face in his two hands and mourned:

"We's gwine lose all our dollars, Coco—dar ain't no hope!"

"Whut did Vinegar Atts specify de niggers wus gwine do to you?" Coco asked.

"He ain't say," Skeeter told her, speaking from a heart filled with misery and dreadful foreboding. "I 'speck dey's gwine hang me."

A wild yell from the Sawtown rooters caused him to glance up listlessly. The slaughter had begun again. With another groan he dropped his head and gave himself up to deep thought.

A sharp crack of hickory against horsehide—Skeeter looked up and saw the Tickfall center-fielder fumbling with the ball, picking it up and dropping it three times, while four hilarious Sawtown men came in and scored.

Skeeter rose to his feet, dusted the seat of his duck trousers, and said to Coco:

"Little gal, you set right here till I gits back. Dar ain't no cross-eyed gals in dis whole town, but I'm gotter bust dat hoodoo sign onless I hankers to die, which ain't so. Is you willin' to he'p me?"

"Suttinly," Coco assured him.

"All right. You set right here an' keep on mascoppin'! I's gwine to Tickfall."

Skeeter ran the quarter of a mile to Tickfall, jumped into the door of the drug-store, and panted:

"Please, suh, I wants a jar of dat white stuff whut de lady folks puts on deir complexion."

"Cold cream?" the clerk inquired.

"Naw, suh; it's a kind of paste whut dey puts on wid a little sponge."

"I got you," the clerk answered, reaching up on a shelf and lifting down a jar. "Face enamel. You go'ner try to git white, Skeeter?"

"Naw, suh; nothin' like dat. Dis is fer a cullud lady pusson," Skeeter snickered as he laid the money on the counter. "How long do it take dis stuff to dry atter you put it on yo' mug?"

"About a minute."

"Kin you gib me a little piece of sponge to smear it on wid?"

The grinning clerk tossed him the sponge, and Skeeter went loping down the street to a dry-goods store.

"Gimme a thick, black veil 'bout a yard long!" he exclaimed. "I wants a mournin' veil!"

With this article clutched in his hand he ran all the way back to the ball game.

"Whut de sco', Hitch?" he squealed as he ran through the crowd.

"Twenty-eight to nothin' favor of de Sawtowns," Hitch grunted with a malignant stare at Skeeter. "You better git busy, Skeeter Butts, an' bust dis hoodoo—ef it is a hoodoo. Dese here niggers wut bet deir money is ackin' powerful peevish an' specify dat you done sold 'em out—I favors dat view myse'f."

"Dat's jes' de way wid niggers," Skeeter whined.

"Dey been winnin' money offen dis nine all summer, an' now when us is struck a losin' streak dey talks 'bout mobbin' me!"

He ran over to where Coco Ferret sat. She looked up and said:

"Whut muss I do, Skeeter? I been tryin' to mascop, but dat don't do no good!"

"Come wid me, honey!" Skeeter replied, and led her through the crowd and into the picnic grounds, where a growth of underbrush screened them from view.

There he produced his jar of face-enamel, and explained:

"Coco, my maw wus de greates' hoodoo dorctor in dis parish. When she died she gimme dis jar of hoodoo juice an' tole me ef I would rub it on de face of de gal I loved dat gal would bust any hoodoo sign in de worl'. I loves you best of all, an' ef you ain't got no real good objections I'll an'int yo' mug wid dis juice."

"Do it hurt?" Coco asked.

"Naw!" Skeeter declared.

He took her hand, rubbed the enamel over the back of her wrist, and wiped it off quickly, leaving the skin coal-black as before.

"It makes de hide feel cold like ice," Coco giggled as she took off her hat and held her head back. "Smear it on thick, Skeeter!"

Skeeter dipped his sponge in the enamel and gladly smeared it on thick. He wiped the mess across the girl's forehead, down each cheek, and under her chin. The black skin under that whiten-

ing made the most poisonous-looking combination imaginable.

"I ain't gwine put dis close aroun' yo' eyes, honey," Skeeter declared. "I'll jes' make a nice roun' ring roun' yo' eyes an' yo' mouth because I's skeart it might sting ef it got in dem places."

"Smear it on thick, Skeeter," the girl snickered. "It shore feels cold an' smells sweet."

In two minutes Skeeter looked upon the work which his hand had made, and pronounced it very good.

"Dat'll shore fetch 'em, Coco," he giggled. "When our mascop shows up all greased wid hoodoo-ile somepin is gwine be doin' wid dem Sawtown coons!"

He laid his black veil on Coco's lap.

"Now, honey, you let dat juice dry a minute, den you put dat veil over yo' hat an' down over yo' face."

Skeeter helped her to adjust the veil, and they were ready.

Ecstatic whoops from the Sawtown team came to their ears, informing them that the massacre was still in progress.

The score stood thirty-seven to nothing in favor of Sawtown, and the Sawtown captain grew weary of the game.

"You fellers stop hittin' dat ball! We got to play at least five innings befo' we kin be shore of gittin' our bet-money," he bellowed. "Us is done got 'em beat—fan out! Eve'y batter is ordered to fan out!"

"Dat's suits me," Skeeter snickered as this com-

mand was expressed loud enough for everyone to hear. "Dey'll change deir tune in a minute. Dey'll want to hit de ball an' cain't!"

The Sawtown batters, responsive to the captain's order, went out—one, two, three.

Again Tickfall was at the bat—the last half of the second inning.

"Now, Coco," Skeeter said as a scar-faced negro named Possum picked up the bat and went to the plate. "Dis is yo' time to git busy an' save de day. You stand over dar—as close to fust base as you kin git. I's gwine over an' stand by third base. Don't you raise up yo' veil until I gives de sign."

"Whut is de sign?" Coco giggled.

"When I lifts my hat like I wus bowin' to a lady den you raise up yo' veil, an' stick it up on top of yo' hat."

"All right," Coco agreed. "I'll watch fer de sign."

"Hey, fellers!" the Sawtown pitcher whooped as he pointed toward first base. "Look at de Tickfall mascop all diked out in black mournin'! Dey got her fixed right now!"

Loud yells from the Sawtown players greeted this remark, and a moment later the Sawtown pitcher delivered the ball. Possum bunted it toward the shortstop, and started for first base like a rabbit.

Skeeter Butts raised his hat with a most exaggerated bow.

Coco Ferret raised her veil.

Possum never reached first base.

He took one look at Coco's face, gave utterance to a howl which would have frightened a European war general, and started for left field by way of the pitcher's box, looking behind him and whining like a dog.

Just as the shortstop threw to first the Sawtown first-baseman got a look at Coco's face.

"My gosh!" he whooped.

His arms dropped paralyzed to his sides, he received the baseball full in his stomach, and started after Possum at his best gait.

"My Gawd!" the Sawtown pitcher yelped; his glove fell from his hand, and he started away.

"Dat gal's got some kind of ketchin' disease!" the third-baseman squalled; and thereupon he and the second-baseman, the shortstop, and the catcher started after the pitcher in wild flight, looking behind them as if fearful that the object of their fright would pursue them.

Coco Ferret, lacking a woman's best friend—a mirror—and having no idea of her horrific appearance, turned and grinned at the crowd of Tickfall negroes, delighted with her success as a hoodoo breaker.

"Oh—my—Lawd A'mighty!" Vinegar Atts bellowed, his eyes popping with fright, his mouth spread wide in horrified imbecility. "Whut is Gawd done gone an' done to dat gal? Run, niggers, run!"

Vinegar's hand was pointing Coco out to the crowd, but the girl at that moment was looking toward Skeeter Butts, grinning like a drunken nightmare.

The crowd paused just long enough to look.

What they saw was a girl who had been shiny-black two hours before—but now her face was white, with black rings around the eyes and mouth; a ghastly, horrible whiteness, poisonous-looking and appalling, enough to frighten any sane man into jimjams.

Vinegar Atts started toward Tickfall, bellowing like a cow.

Four hundred squalling blacks fell in behind him, fighting for room to run, grabbing at each other's coat tails to accelerate their speed, taking frightened glances behind them every moment, then adding another octave to the vocalization of their fright.

Out on the highroad they kicked up the dust and sand like a cyclone, but the dust-cloud did not obscure the light-blue dress of Coco Ferret as she trotted down the road behind them.

Skeeter Butts trotted behind Coco, cackling like a hen.

"Keep it up, honey!" he squawked. "You shore is a grand little hoodoo sign buster! Chase 'em plum' to town! You done saved our money an' saved my life!"

At the little bridge over the Coolie Creek on the edge of Tickfall, Skeeter Butts tried to stop her.

"Less blow a while an' rest our foots, Coco," he snickered. "Lawd, dat shore wus a dandy race!"

"Naw!" Coco declared. "I ain't gwine rest till I gits home! Dis here mess is hot on my face. It wus cool at fust."

"Pull down yo' veil, honey!" Skeeter begged her.

"Dis here face juice is too precious fer igernunt niggers to see."

Coco adjusted her veil, and they lingered a moment at the bridge, cooling off under the shade of the trees. Finally Coco asked:

"Skeeter, wus dem niggers runnin' away from me?"

"Naw!" Skeeter declared. "It wus dat hoodoo juice dat sont 'em skootin' home. My maw shore told de truth 'bout dat juice."

"Kin I have de rest of de juice, Skeeter?" Coco asked as they strolled slowly toward her cabin.

"Suttinly!" Skeeter said, producing the little jar from his pocket. "But I bet you don't never use it no more, Coco."

"I bet I does," Coco giggled as they walked up the steps of her cabin.

The girl laid her hat and veil on the bed and sat down.

Skeeter broke into a loud laugh.

"Whut you laughin' at, nigger?" Coco demanded.

"Go, take a peep at yo'se'f in de lookin'-glass, Coco," Skeeter cackled. "Oh, my goodness gracious Moses——"

He sprang to his feet, caught hold of the mantel with both hands, and hung there, helpless with laughter, his alligator mouth stretched to the limit.

Coco walked to the mirror.

"My stars an' garters!" she howled at sight of her face. "Skeeter Butts, is you made me look like de debbil's wife on purpose?"

"Sure!" Skeeter whooped. "I wus 'bout to

lose my bets —fawty dollars fer me an' ten fer you——"

"Is you made me look like dis to save you money?" Coco demanded in irate tones. "You treat yo' gwine-be wife like dat?"

"Yes'm!" Skeeter shrieked amid his paroxysms of laughter. "Oh, my honey bird—you is de dangest sight ever I did see since de day I wus borned on—whoop-ee!"

Coco suddenly snatched open the drawer of her bureau, and Skeeter saw the malignant gleam of a nickel-plated, pearl-handled revolver.

"Murder-r-r!" he shrieked as he shot through the door with the speed of a comet.

As he passed out of the door a bullet flattened against the jamb close to his face.

As he passed through the yard gate the splinters from two more bullets were shattered from the posts close beside him.

As he galloped wildly down the street two more bullets kicked up the dust around his flying feet.

He bounced through the swinging doors of the Hen-Scratch saloon and found his establishment crowded with negroes demanding back the money they had bet.

"All bets is declared off, niggers!" Skeeter panted.

He sank weakly into a chair, wiped the sweat from his face with a trembling hand, fanned himself with his hat for a moment, then made another announcement:

"All my weddin' arrangements is declared off, too, niggers!"

"How come?" the Rev. Vinegar Atts demanded, saddened by the loss of a wedding fee.

Skeeter panted for breath, and finally explained:

"Dat female mascop is done jinxed me!"

Messing with Matrimony

I

TICK PROMISES

TICK HUSH looked like a negro who would work like a horse, and who would do as he was told.

Colonel Tom Gaitskill leaned back in his swivel chair for a comprehensive survey of this new applicant for a job.

He saw a brown-skinned man, with a big round head, a flat nose, heavy lips that were easy-smiling, and eyes which were as wide-open, as simple and innocent as the black, glass eyes of a china doll. He noticed that the man stood perfectly straight, without nervousness, and that his big hands were hard and square—the hands of a willing worker.

"I don't know nothin' but how to wuck de lan', Marse Tom," Tick told him. "Farmin' is my trade. So when I heerd tell dat you done bought dat farm whar de ole pest-house was located at, I figgered dat dis wus a chance to git me a good job wid a good boss."

The speech won Gaitskill's favor. Negroes are afraid of hospitals, quarantine stations, and graveyards. He had had difficulty in securing a negro

tenant for this newly acquired farm because the pest-house occupied a portion of the plantation.

"Aren't you afraid of that farm, Tick?" Gaitskill smiled.

"Naw, suh," Tick chuckled. "De cullud folks orate 'bout all dem bad ketchin' diseases in de pest-house, but I ain't gwine pester aroun' in dat neighborhood none."

Gaitskill determined to test the negro's sincerity once for all.

"Think of the people who have died out there, Tick," he said. "When I was a boy there was an epidemic of cholera, and the people died in that old stone house like flies. After that there was yellow fever, and nobody who was taken into that house for quarantine ever came out alive. There have been epidemics of diphtheria, scarlet fever, and smallpox. People are buried all around that quarantine station —you mean to tell me that you are not afraid?"

"Naw, suh, I ain't skeart," Tick grinned. "Dem folks is all been dead so long dey done fergot whut dey died of. Dem bad ketchin' diseases is done kotch on to somebody else by dis time an' been toted away. Of co'se, I ain't gwine dig fer no buried money aroun' dat spot."

"I'm sure of that," Gaitskill told him.

"An' I don't figger on havin' much comp'ny out dar," Tick chuckled. "Niggers ain't gwine make my place no hangout. Ef I got inter real bad trouble, I might could hide in dat pest-house—nobody ain't comin' dar atter me."

"I hadn't thought of that," Gaitskill smiled.

"But I will not object if your idle, loafing friends stay away. At the same time, I presume you will often be lonesome—are you married?"

"Naw, suh."

Gaitskill leaned back in his chair and tapped the top of the table with the rubber of his pencil.

"Why haven't you married, Tick?" he inquired.

"Cain't affode it, Marse Tom."

"How do you know you can't?" Gaitskill asked curiously.

"I figgered dat all out once, boss," Tick grinned. "I wus wuckin' as a wage-han' on de Coon-Skin plantation. I tuck a notion I wus qualified to take a wife, I wus shore I could git one, but I warn't shore I could suppote her."

"How did you decide that matter?" Gaitskill asked.

"I wus doin' my own cookin' an' livin' in a cabin by myse'f alone, so I fixed up a way to try it out. I sot two plates at de table. Eve'y time I et a biskit, I sot a biskit on dat yuther plate. Eve'y time I he'ped myse'f to a b'ilin' of greens, I put some on dat yuther plate. Eve'y time I wanted a corn pone, I baked two in de hot ash, and' throwed one of 'em out to my houn' dawg. At de eend of de month I counted up my money whut wus lef' over, an'—my Gawd, boss—it shore cain't be did by me. Keepin' a wife is too blame expenshus."

Gaitskill pulled his heavy silken mustache down over his mouth to hide his widely smiling lips. Thus disheveled, he resembled a venerable walrus with an amiable disposition. After a while he spoke.

"I want a married man for the quarantine plantation, Tick. There is a good house on the other side of the farm from the pest-house, and there is ample accommodation for cows, chickens, and hogs. There's a good garden plot and a number of fruit trees. An unmarried man won't attend to these things, and I want some one who will keep the place up."

"Dat's powerful bad news, Marse Tom," Tick replied as he took a step backward toward the door. "I suttinly had my whole insides sot on gittin' charge of dat plantation. Yes, suh."

Gaitskill sat waiting, confidently anticipating Tick's next remark. The colored man's mental processes were slow, but at last he arrived.

"Mebbe I might could git me a wife, Marse Tom," he suggested.

"That's the very idea I had in mind," Gaitskill smiled. "If you promise to get married within the next two weeks, I'll locate you on the pest-house plantation for the next five years."

"Mebbe no woman won't take no ole tough gizzard like me," Tick remarked with humility.

"That's up to you," Gaitskill laughed. "I think if you will emphasize the fact that you are getting the management of a good farm, a good house, plenty of fruit, a number of cows, chickens, and a good garden, and the woman is sure that you will put as much on her plate as you do on your own—well, try it, anyway."

"I'll shore try it on," the negro answered with ludicrous solemnity as he turned and started out of the door.

"And, listen, Tick!" Gaitskill exclaimed as he turned to pick up some papers on his desk and resume his interrupted work. "If you find a woman who is willing to marry you, let me know, and I'll furnish the marriage license—it won't cost you a cent!"

"Thank 'e, suh!" Tick grinned. "Dat 'll he'p me a heap!"

Tick passed out of the bank and stood on the street in front of the big plateglass window. He took off his battered wool hat and scratched his woolly head in real perplexity. Certainly, Marse Tom had assigned him a tremendous task.

The world was full of marriageable colored women.

What woman should he ask?

He looked up and down the street with an appraising eye. He could see ten women; some were fat and some were lean, some were kind and some were mean—what kind should he choose?

"Dat white man shore is wropped up my kinky hair with a strong string," he sighed as he mopped the sweat from his face. "I b'lieve I'll go ax a few advices outen Skeeter Butts."

II

SKEETER HELPS

No one knows how Skeeter Butts got his reputation among the members of his race as the possessor of supernal wisdom. Nevertheless, in every emergency it was their custom to ask Skeeter Butts, and Skeeter was always there with the good advice.

Inexpert physicians frequently say to their

patients, "I'll try this medicine, and if it don't do the work, I'll change to something else." Skeeter followed the same method with his advice. With the inexpert physician, too, often one medicine calls for another; always with Skeeter, one suggestion led to another; and the reason with both was the same—because dangerous complications "set up."

On matrimonial matters, Skeeter was supposed to be extremely wise.

He had courted every woman in Tickfall and its environs without actually committing matrimony. His experiences had been many and varied, and highly educational. So when Tick Hush appeared in the Hen-Scratch saloon with a look of perplexed melancholy upon his brown face, Skeeter at once heated up his mental incubator to hatch out a few rare thoughts.

"Dis here is a awful mess, Skeeter," Tick began as he held an ill-smelling perique stogie between his stiff and trembling lips. "Marse Tom Gaitskill is shore kotch my tail in a cuttin'-box."

"How come?" Skeeter asked.

"He offered me a job on de pest-house plantation pervidin' only but dat I gits married inside two weeks."

"Dat's easy," Skeeter grinned. "Lady folks is crazy 'bout steppin' off, an' anybody kin git married."

"How is dat did?" Tick asked.

"At de fust off-startin', you seleck a woman whut you wants to marry," Skeeter suggested.

"Dat gits me in a jam right now," Tick mourned. "I's powerful fondish on two nigger women."

"Uh-huh," Skeeter grunted. "Dat looks like compilations mought set up an' us 'll hab plenty doin's. Name de femaleses!"

"Limit Lark an' Vakey Vapp," Tick told him.

"Gosh!" Skeeter sighed. "Why cain't you rattle de bones, or cut cyards, or flop up a jitney, an' decide which am de whicher?"

"'Tain't pious," Tick replied.

"You needn't let dat pester you," Skeeter cackled. "Ary one of dem womens will make you lose yo' religium powerful soon atter you marries 'em."

"Cain't you think up no highbrow way of deecidin'?" Tick inquired.

"Suttinly," Skeeter snapped. "But I don't think brains he'ps a man whut's got his mind sot on mettermony. Look at me—I's a smart, up-to-date, new-issue nigger—an' I cain't git married to nothin'! Brains don't git me even a two-times, secont-han', hand-me-down widder!"

"Dat's because you is too choosey," Tick grinned.

"Mebbe so," Skeeter replied, as he applied his mind to the problem before him. At last he suggested:

"How would it suit to write a letter to one of dem niggers an' ax her to marry you?"

"Dat don't he'p me," Tick explained. "Ef I knowed which one to write to fust, I'd know which one to ax fust——"

"I sees," Skeeter interrupted. "You likes 'em bofe alike, each one as much as de yuther. Well—whichsomever one you take, you'll wish to Gawd you'd tuck de yuther one—lemme think!"

Skeeter lighted a cigarette and rubbed his nervous hands over his closely cropped head. Then he jumped to his feet with a yelp.

"I got it, Ticky!" he squealed. "Dis here is a histidious notion—listen. You an' me will write a letter to bofe dem nigger womens. Den we'll git a nigger whut cain't read ner write to pick out one of dem letters outen a hat. De letter whut de igernunt coon picks out is de one to be sont."

"Listen to dat!" Tick Huch applauded. "Dat sounds real cute. Git some paper an' a writin' pencil!"

Skeeter found two soiled envelopes, a writing-pad and the stub of a pencil. Sitting down at a table, he arranged them carefully, and said:

"You do de heavy thinkin', Ticky, while I writes!"

Tick Hush rose to his feet and began a nervous pacing up and down beside the table. He cleared his throat, wiped the sweat from his face, fanned himself with his hat, took off one brogan shoe and shook the gravel out of it.

Skeeter Butts sat and waited.

At length, Tick straightened up, breathed like a husky bellows, and began:

"Dear Limit—" Then he broke off to ask: "How 'm I gittin' along so fur, Skeeter?"

"Dat's a fine start-off," Skeeter assured him. "I think she'll kotch on to dat easy."

"Say, 'I wants to git married right away'—hold on, Skeeter!" Tick exclaimed in a sudden panic. "Don't be so peart 'bout writin' how soon—tell her atter while, befo' long, when I kin git aroun' to it, when de craps is all in, or somepin like dat."

"Naw!" Skeeter retorted as he began to write. "Tell her de real facks: 'I wants to git married in de nex' ten days.'"

"O Lawdy," Tick sighed. "Dat sounds powerful early to me!"

"Go on!" Skeeter snapped.

"Say, 'I hopes—I hopes—I hopes——'"

"Shut up!" Skeeter snapped. "You sound like a danged ole donkey brayin'—you don't hope nothin'! Tell on!"

"Say, 'Me an' Skeeter—us thinks you-all oughter marry us'!" Tick Hush dictated.

Skeeter Butts laid aside his pencil and leaned back, glaring at Tick with mingled pity and contempt.

"You is de worst igermus I knows of, Ticky Hush!" he squealed. "Ef you an' me wus to swap heads, I'd die a durn fool! Stop talkin' wid yo' mouth an' think!"

Thus admonished, Tick Hush took a big breath and a tidal wave of dictation splashed all around the head of Skeeter Butts.

"Say, 'Will you marry me real soon?' Say, 'I got a job on Marse Tom Gaitskill's pest-house farm.' Say, 'I'll take you out to see de place.' Say, 'We lives togedder—plenty money, plenty eats. Answer prompt! Yours—yo' husbunt—yo——'"

"Naw!" Skeeter interrupted. "You don't want no answer through de mail-box—tell her to meet you somewhar to-morrer night, ef she is willin' to take you on!"

"Dat's right!" Tick agreed. Then he dictated: "Say, 'Answer prompt. Ef you is willin', meet

me to-morrer night behime de Shoofly church under dat big sycamo' tree. Yours truly Tick Hush."

"Dat's de way to talk it," Skeeter applauded. "Ef you wants a hoe-cake, reach out yo' hand fer it. Now wait a minute till I copy dis same letter, because we got to hab two."

When Skeeter had made the copy, he addressed the two envelopes and slipped one message into each, being extremely careful not to get the letters mixed and put them in the wrong envelopes.

"Now, Skeeter," Ticky asked, "who we gwine git to pick out dis letter?"

"Little Bit cain't read nothin'," Skeeter suggested.

"Let him pick," Tick agreed.

In answer to Skeeter's call, a diminutive, bullet-headed boy came from the rear room and picked up a white envelope.

"Dat's all, Little Bit!" Skeeter told him. "You git!"

With the nervous solemnity of a man who was determining the destiny of two lives, Skeeter turned the envelope so he could see the address.

"It's de letter to Limit Lark," he almost whispered.

Tick Hush sighed deeply.

"Dat's fine, Skeeter," he said in a low voice. "I sorter hoped it 'd be Limit Lark, an' I'd be plum' happy ef she takes me—only but now I kinder wish de yuther woman hadn't drawed no blank."

"Mebbe Limit won't take you an' dat 'll gib you a shot at de yuther gal," Skeeter said hopefully. "Lemme see. Limit wucks fer Judge Lanark. I'll

write his name on one cornder of dis, an' dey 'll put de letter in de judge's box."

Skeeter stamped the envelope and called Little Bit.

"Take dis right straight to de post-office, boy," he commanded.

"Much obleeged, Skeeter," Tick said as he started out. "Dat he'ps a mighty load offen my mind."

When Tick Hush had gone, Skeeter stood fumbling with the letter addressed to Vakey Vapp. He placed a stamp upon it. Then a slow grin spread over his face.

"It's a plum' pity dat Vakey Vapp don't git no letter," he murmured. "I's gwine down an' mail dis letter to her as soon as Little Bit gits back. Bofe dem womans cain't want Tick, an' 'twon't do no harm. Mebbe it'll do a large amount of great good."

III

SAFETY FIRST

On his way to keep his engagement with Limit Lark under the tree behind the Shoofly church, Tick Hush had to pass the Hen-Scratch saloon. When he reached the door he walked in.

"I helt up a minute fer a few last advices, Skeeter," he said nervously as he fumbled with his hat and panted like a tired dog.

"Whut ails you now?" Skeeter demanded.

"Ef dat woman meets me under dat tree, whut muss I say to her?" Tick inquired.

"Ax her did she git yo' letter," Skeeter suggested.

"She won't be dar ef she don't git de letter," Tick protested.

"Suttinly," Skeeter agreed, "but dat will make talk an' it's a good way to begin."

"Whut muss I say atter dat?" Tick asked helplessly.

"Ax her will she marry you," Skeeter said.

"Ef she say she will, whut muss I do next?" Tick wanted to know.

"Grab her!" Skeeter cackled. "Swing onto her like a cockle-bur to a woolly dawg's y-ear!"

"Dat sounds easy!" Tick remarked, in a tone which indicated that he considered the task attended by both difficulty and danger. "I shore hopes I don't make no miscue!"

"You cain't make no mistake," Skeeter grinned. "Womens likes to be hugged. I knows—I done tried it a millyum times. Dat's yo' one safe bet!"

"All right!" Tick remarked in a tone indicating that it was all wrong, and he rose reluctantly to his feet. "I'll try to make de riffle—but you listen out, Skeeter! Ef you hear any real loud hollerin' up de Shoofly way, you'll know it's me! I got a hunch dat de grabbin' will be on de yuther foot—dat nigger woman is gwine grab me!"

"Dat 'll be best of all," Skeeter said, with a knowing grin. "Ef she do de grabbin', dat means you is shore kotch—pervidin' she don't bite an' scratch at de same time."

Tick slowly retreated from the room, and Skeeter promptly reached for his own hat and started in the same direction.

"Dat po' fool nigger mought need a little back-up-ance," said Skeeter, grinning to himself.

In the shadow of the Shoofly church Tick Hush waited, his anxious eyes fixed upon a bench under a sycamore tree where he was to meet and make the final matrimonial arrangements with Limit Lark.

Sometimes there comes out of the swamp into Tickfall a negro so simple that his life has consisted of eating, sleeping, and working. Having lived far from civilization, his innocence and ignorance are amazing. He is a joy to the planter, for he works hard and does just as he is told to do. Coming into contact with the negro social life of Tickfall, he is also a joy to his colored friends—he contributes so largely to the funny side of life.

Skeeter knew that Tick Hush was sure to contribute much to the gaiety of the negro inhabitants of Tickfall, and he had already tipped off his friends to be ready to help him when he needed them.

So Tick waited at the church, peering across the yard in the dim light of a young moon, feeling more nervous and panicky as the moments passed, repeating with dry lips the instructions of Skeeter Butts:

"Ax her did she git de letter—ax her to marry me —grab her!"

Then a sudden weakness overcame him and he sat down upon the ground so forcibly that he nearly jarred his head loose from the rest of his anatomy.

"Gosh!" he murmured.

A woman dressed in white had moved quickly across the churcyard and had seated herself upon the bench under the sycamore tree. Tick experienced

about the same sensation that might come to a war spy backed up against a church wall and facing a firing squad. Tick knew he was facing his fate.

"I guess I'm got to make de riffle," he sighed as he started slowly across the churchyard.

The woman saw him and stood up.

"Hello, Limit!" Tick began. "Did you git my letter?"

"Yes, suh," the girl giggled.

She was a tall, neatly dressed woman, with typical African features and skin as black as coal. In the dim moonlight she began to look good to the embarrassed Tick Hush.

Tick felt his courage oozing away, so he began to speak in a loud voice:

"Is you gwine marry me?" he howled.

"Hush!" Limit whispered. "Some nigger woman is comin' dis way—she mought hear us!"

The two sat down on the bench and waited.

The second woman came up confidently, jauntily.

She was a square-headed, woolly-haired, pout-lipped negro, with a short temper and a long tongue.

It was Vakey Vapp.

Tick Hush gazed at her in horror. Already he could hear himself squalling to Skeeter Butts to come and rescue him from the wrath of these two women.

"Hello, Ticky," Vakey said easily. "I got yo' letter all right an' I got here as quick as I could. Dat Gaitskill plantation looks good to me. I favors ownin' it right now!"

"Hold on, cullud folks!" Tick begged. "Don't shove me along so peart. You got to start me slow

an' gimme time. S'pose you-alls sets here a minute an' converse yo'se'ves, an' lemme go git Skeeter Butts."

"Whut you need wid Skeeter?" Limit Lark inquired.

"Eh—uh—oh, Lawdy, I needs him bad—Skeeter's pretty handy to hab aroun'. I needs him fer comp'ny—social puppuses—gosh!"

"Whut's pesterin' yo' mind, Tick?" Vakey snapped. "You ain't actin' plum honest about somepin!"

"Yes'm—dat's a fack—er—I speck I better git gwine!" Tick moaned.

"Not yit, Ticky!" Limit Lark said sharply. "I done walked pretty fur to dis place an' I wants my permittune to marry you right now. Is you gwine hitch up wid me?"

"Honey," Tick said desperately, "I don't like to say nothin' 'bout dat befo' comp'ny—less git off alone by ourse'ves fust!"

"How's dat?" Vakey snapped. "Whut you sayin', Ticky? Is you figgerin' on marryin' dis here Limit nigger?"

"No'm," Tick began, "I ain't really especkin' to——"

"Whut you say, nigger man?" Limit howled, laying a firm and competent hand upon Tick's coat collar. "Talk straight, Ticky! An' don't you fergit dat I always totes a mighty hard fist fer social pupposes!"

She thrust a big clenched hand under Tick's nose, and Tick whistled through his nostrils like a mustang smelling a bear.

"I totes a big gun fer social pupposes!" Vakey Vapp announced in a raucous voice as she thrust her right hand into the folds of her ragged dress.

Then Tick squalled and bolted. But he did not get very far. Limit and Vakey pooled their interests. They laid hold upon the struggling colored man, fought with him across the yard, and backed him up against the church, a terrified chunk of cringing flesh.

"Now, Ticky," Vakey proclaimed as she flourished her big pistol before Tick's frightened face, "me an' Limit is gwine straighten you out flat. You cain't fool no ole ginny-hens like us—so you better tell de Gawd's truth."

"Yes'm," Tick stuttered.

"Did you write dis letter to me?" Vakey howled, shaking a soiled envelope under Tick's nose.

"Yes'm," Tick stuttered.

"Did you write dis here letter to me?" Limit whooped, waving another soiled envelope before his face.

"Yes'm," Tick chattered.

"How come?" the two whooped in irate tones.

Vakey's right hand was waving a pistol with what seemed to Tick to be extreme carelessness. He was sure he was going to be killed, and he lifted his terrified eyes for one startled look at the white tombstones which stood in the graveyard beside the church.

Then the only inspiration he had ever had came to him in a flash.

"My Gawd!" he whooped, and his face and voice were certainly expressive of terror, an alarm he had

been feeling for ten minutes. "My Gawd! Look over yander at that graveyard!"

The two women turned to look with startled suddenness.

It was quite an artful ruse for a slow wit like Tick Hush. He had not seen a thing, but as the women turned Tick took the first step in his getaway.

Then a fortuitous circumstance contributed to Tick's escape.

Skeeter Butts had concealed himself on the far side of the churchyard near to the cemetery fence in order to command a large view of the locality near the sycamore tree where Tick was to meet the two women.

Skeeter was afraid of that graveyard. He did not like to lie down so near to it. For ten minutes the cold shivers had been chasing up and down his spine, and he earnestly desired to be anywhere but where he was.

As soon as he heard Tick's horrified exclamation he felt like he must leave the vicinity of the burying-ground at once. He arose to depart, and thus it happened that it was Skeeter dressed in a ghostly white duck suit, that the two negro women saw!

Vakey Vapp raised the pistol which she kept for social purposes and fired five shots in rapid succession at Skeeter Butts. For the first time in his adventurous life Skeeter went through a graveyard at night alone!

Tick Hush went to Tickfall, running about one hundred yards in advance of the two women, and the trio made as much noise as a calliope played by a maniac with a hundred fingers!

IV

THE COLONEL ISSUES ORDERS

In every storm Tick Hush always anchored himself to a white man. So, on this occasion, he did not stop running until he stood gasping for breath on Colonel Tom Gaitskill's lawn.

Tick heard voices coming from the porch, and he knew better than to rush precipitately into the presence of guests. He began to listen, and after a while he broke into a grin.

"Dem white men is feelin' good. Dey's jes' explodin' jokes to each yuther. I's gwine bust in an' explode my tale of trouble."

He walked closer to the porch and stood where the pale moonlight fell upon him.

"Is dat Marse Tom Gaitskill's voice I hears?" he asked in a timid tone.

"Yes. What is it?"

"Marse Tom, I's in powerful deep trouble," Tick sighed as he came up to the porch steps. "Yes, suh, trouble is done slopped my trough good."

"Well—tell us about it," Gaitskill said impatiently. "Spill it!"

"You tole me I had to git married, Marse Tom," Tick began. "I fanciated two nigger womens pretty good, so I writ a letter to bofe of 'em an' axed 'em to marry me. Bofe of 'em tuck me up on dat."

"That ought to make you feel happy," Gaitskill chuckled.

"Naw, suh, it worries me in my mind. You see,

bofe dem niggers met me under a sycamo' tree, an' one of 'em bragged her brags dat she toted a pistol reg'lar, an' dey backed me up ag'in'de chu'ch to pussuade me, an'—an' a ha'nt come outen de graveyard——"

Tick stopped and chuckled.

"That ha'nt shore done me a good favor. I'd 'a' been a ha'nt myse'f by now ef he hadn't showed up so handy."

"What did you do?" Gaitskill laughed.

"I lef' dem two nigger womens wid him," Tick snickered. "Dat ha'nt never could 'a' kep' up wid me—he didn't had no use fer me nohow—an' I didn't need him—so I let de lady folks hab him all to deir-se'ves."

"You've heard this negro's testimony, judge. What's your verdict?" Gaitskill asked smilingly of Judge Henry Lanark, who sat beside him on the porch.

"Thank the Lord, I'm no lunacy jury," Lanark laughed. Then he asked: "Was one of those women named Limit, Tick?"

"Yes, suh."

"I have a little corroborating testimony to offer," Judge Lanark remarked to Gaitskill. "I got a letter in my post-office box to-day addressed to Limit Lark, my cook. I presume Tick picked her for matrimonial honors."

"Yes, suh, dat's her," Tick chuckled.

"What do you want me to do about it, Tick?" Gaitskill asked.

"I dunno, Marse Tom. I jes' come to git a view from you 'bout dat."

"What do you think those two women will do to you?" Gaitskill queried.

"Kill me dead," Tick answered simply.

"In that case, I presume you do not care to consider a matrimonial alliance with either," Gaitskill grinned.

"Naw, suh, nothin' like dat."

"What do you think those two women will do to each other when they compare the contents of those two letters?" Gaitskill asked next.

"Gawd knows," Tick sighed.

"It would be wise to recover those letters, if possible," Judge Lanark suggested.

"I kin git 'em all right," Tick said. "Bofe letters is layin' on de groun' close to de Shoofly chu'ch whar dey drapped 'em down when dey seed de ha'nt."

"Go get them at once!" Lanark commanded.

"I'll git 'em in de mawnin', jedge," Tick replied. "Nobody ain't gwine pick 'em up to-night—not no niggers—dey ain't!"

"Isn't there some other woman you could fall in love with?" Gaitskill wanted to know.

"I 'speck so, boss."

"I advise you to choose a third party and marry her," Gaitskill said.

"I's kinder squeamish 'bout dat, kunnel," Tick said earnestly. "You see, dis am de fustest time I is ever messed wid mattermony, an' I ain't real shore of my foot-holt."

"You have messed it pretty well, so far," Gaitskill laughed. "Of course, if you don't want to marry, I think I can find some other man to put on my plantation as tenant——"

"Naw, suh, kunnel," Tick interrupted with emphasis. "I's gwine git dat job ef I's got to mess up wid all de mattermony ladies in dis town. I needs dat job."

"Go as far as you like," Gaitskill smiled. "You can't make me mad. If you get into trouble I'll help you all I can, and I am sure the judge will give you the benefit of his legal knowledge and experience."

"Will you-alls really he'p me, Marse Tom?" Tick asked eagerly.

Gaitskill did not know that his jesting words were being taken seriously. So his answer to Tick's eager question was unfortunate. It had the effect of turning Tick loose on the community, feeling that he could do anything with impunity because the colonel and the judge were with him.

"Certainly," Gaitskill said. "We'll be glad to help you."

"Could you begin he'pin' by loantin' me five dollars?" Tick asked diffidently

"Give it to him!" Lanark exploded. "War munitions—campaign expenses!"

Tick turned away with the money in his pocket and exultation in his heart. With two great men to back his enterprises, he was sure he could accomplish great things. Whatever the risks, he would be perfectly safe. Even if he got into jail, the judge would help him out again.

"I'll mess wid mattermony, all right!" he chuckled. "It's de kunnel's awders!"

V

SKEETER HELPS SOME MORE

Early the next morning Tick Hush appeared at the Hen-Scratch saloon and found Skeeter Butts nursing a grouch and sundry bruises, all of which he had received in his wild flight through the graveyard.

"Whut you showin' up here fer?" Skeeter snarled.

"Troubles," Tick told him.

"I'm got 'em of my own," Skeeter snapped. "Don't pesticate me."

"You's de only good-advicin' nigger in Tickfall, Skeeter," Tick said earnestly. "Ef a feller cain't ax you 'terrogations, he mought as well go out an' suicide hisse'f!"

"Ain't it de trufe!" Skeeter grinned, greatly mollified by this praise. "Whut ails you now?"

"I had a leetle talk wid Limit an' Vakey las' night, an' I done decided to cut 'em bofe out. Dey argufies pretty sharp yistiddy evenin'. One of 'em applied at me wid a big gun—I don't favor dat kind of nigger."

"Ef you is done got dat wise, you don't need no more advices," Skeeter grinned. "Eve'y nigger woman argufies wid guns an' razors an' skillets, an' truck like dat. Of co'se, ef you cuts all dat out, dat means you ain't gwine hitch double wid nobody."

"But I got to marry!" Tick exclaimed. "Marse Tom specify——"

"All right!" Skeeter interrupted tartly. "Who am de choosen woman now?"

"Well, suh, I cogitate dat Button Hook is de right kind of meekified woman fer me to take on," Tick declared. "Button is kinder sweet an' soft-spoke."

"I fell in love wid a woman like dat wunst," Skeeter grinned. "Us wus about to git married. I axed her whut she done fer a livin' so she could suppote me like I wus raised—an' she said she an' her pap kotch snakes in de swamp an' sold 'em to show folks in a circus. De nex' time I seed her she had a lapful of rattlesnakes—dat wus de last time I looked at her, too!"

"My Lawd!" Tick murmured.

"You cain't tell nothin' 'bout pickin' 'em," Skeeter continued. "Dey's wuss'n race-hosses. You bet yo' money an' you lose it on a hoss; you bet yo' money an' you lose it on a woman; an' on top of dat you is wished yo'se'f a live job, losin' money all de time."

"Now, 'bout dis Button Hook—" Tick began.

"Suttinly," Skeeter Butts interrupted. "She'll throw de hook inter you all right. You go nibblin' aroun' dat hook an' you's already a sucker on a string—powerful soon you'll be crackin' an' fryin' in a skillet. Suttinly—go ahead! Whut wus you gwine to say?"

"I wus fixin' to remark dat she comes in pretty handy right now. Dat's my onlies' chance. Marse Tom specify fer me to seleck a third party. De kunnel an' Judge Lanark gib me a few advices las' night, an' bofe dem white mens said dey would stan' by me."

Skeeter sat up with a sudden and great interest.

"Why'n't you tell me dat Kunnel Gaitskill an' Jedge Lanark wus backin' you in dis race? Dat

makes it plum diffunt. I jines in wid de white folks, too."

"Dat happifies me consid'able, Skeeter," Tick exclaimed with a wide grin. "Whut is our fust move-up?"

"We mought write a letter to Button——"

"Naw!" Tick exploded. "Jedge Lanark say dat govermint wus agin love letters—dey gits you in trouble wid de cotehouse. Dem two niggers drapped dem letters on de groun' las' night, an' I foun' 'em close to de Shoofly chu'ch dis mawnin'. I got 'em in de inside coat-pocket right now, next to my heart."

"Gib 'em to me—" Skeeter said eagerly.

"Naw, suh. I'll tote 'em in my own coat-pocket," Tick snarled. "I let you keep one yistiddy an' it got away from you! Go on wid dem Button advices!"

"You mought send Button a box of candy, den wait a day or two an' go out dar an' talk sweet——"

"'Twon't do, Skeeter. Candy costs money; excusin' dat, I got to hurry along wid dis mattermony—I needs somepin hasty."

"Run in dar some night an' kidnap her up!" Skeeter suggested.

"Say, Skeeter," Tick asked with a wide grin, "did you ever hear a skeart nigger woman holler?"

"Yes, indeedy," the little barkeeper snickered. "I heerd two las' night. Steamboat whistles am jes' little wheezes when a nigger woman begins to squall."

"No nigger-stealin' fer me," Tick announced with finality.

Skeeter lighted a cigarette and began to ponder.

Give Skeeter Butts the number two, and his active

brain could always make four or forty-four by the simple process of multiplying. From the little Tick Hush had said, Skeeter multiplied and got this result: Gaitskill and Lanark had selected Button Hook as a suitable wife for Tick Hush; the white folks would be greatly disappointed if Tick did not marry her; any man who helped Tick get married to the woman of their choice would be in good favor with those two influential white men.

Reasoning thus, Skeeter determined to invent a plan which would insure a hasty marriage between Tick and Button, and he resolved at the same time to be the best man at their wedding. Most people, facing this situation, would have told Tick to go to Button Hook and ask her to marry him, pressing his suit with ardor, eloquence, and affection until the lady consented. But Skeeter never could think of the obvious thing.

There was a long silence in the Hen-Scratch saloon, interrupted only by the scratching of matches and the jiggering of feet.

At length Skeeter stood up with a loud laugh.

"Gee," he howled. "My brains shore is actin' like gourd-seeds to-day—I wonder how I never thunk of dat at fust!"

"Don't bust no jokes on me, Skeeter," Tick warned him. "Dis here is solemn bizzness, an' de white folks don't take no nigger foolishness."

"Listen, Tick!" Skeeter commanded. "Whut you needs is a few lessons in coteship an' marriage."

"Dat's a fack," Tick agreed. "I needs a shawt cut-off."

"Dar's a actor-woman in dis town named Dazzle Zenor. She plays love parts in shows. I acted wid her once—we wus stunt-dancers fer de Nigger Uplift dat time I got shotted accidental."

"Dat don't he'p me none——"

"Aw, shut up!" Skeeter snapped. "You listen to me talk! Fools like you gimme a pain. Now, dis here Dazzle gal, she knows all about how to make love an' how to cote a gal an' how to ax to git married because she studies dat fer de stage."

"I sees de light," Tick grinned.

"Now, de dog's tail wags dis way," Skeeter said, warming up to his great idea. "You wants to go to Dazzle Zenor an' ax her to gib you a few cheap lessons on how to make love an' git married quick."

"Dat's whut I needs!" Tick agreed hesitatingly.

"Isyou got any money on yer?" Skeeter demanded.

"De kunnel gib me five dollars las' night," Tick replied reluctantly.

"Dat's a plenty," Skeeter told him. "Dazzle will gib you five dollars' wuth of lessons, an' den you kin git married jes' like drappin' a hat."

"Whar do Dazzle stay at?"

"She stays at Ginny Babe Chew's house."

"Would you mind gwine wid me, Skeeter?" Tick inquired. "I needs somebody to he'p me make de fust arrangements."

"I never had no yuther idear!" Skeeter howled. "Ain't dis here my plan? I don't let no rooster like you crow up my big idears—I sees 'em through."

He reached for his hat, and Tick stood up to go with him. Then he whooped:

"Oh, Little Bit! You take keer dis saloom till I gits back!"

VI

LOVE LESSONS

"You do de talkin' fer me, Skeeter," Tick begged as they entered Ginny Babe Chew's yard. "I ain't never got into no mess like dis befo', an' I cain't tongue it out as free as you kin."

"Dar she am," Skeeter exclaimed, as he pointed to a young colored woman sitting on a bench under a pecan tree at the side of the house. "Come on!"

Dazzle Zenor was certainly the sort of woman a colored man would naturally select to teach him the art of love. She was slim and graceful, neat as a new pin and beautifully dressed; she had fine Moorish features, and smiled with beautiful teeth and did flattering things with her eyes, for Dazzle was a real actress.

"Dis here cullud gen'leman is got de love-bug, Dazzle," Skeeter explained. "He wants to cote a gal so dat he kin marry her real prompt, an' he don't know how it is did. I tole him you wus a female actor an' you could teach him how to love wid one lesson."

Then Skeeter executed an elaborate wink.

"How much kin you pay?" Dazzle asked, looking at Tick.

"How much do it cost?" Tick asked cautiously.

"How many money is you got?" Dazzle inquired.

Tick handed her a five-dollar bill.

"Dat's a plenty," Dazzle laughed as she folded the bill and slipped it into the palm of her kid glove. Then she looked Tick over as if he were a horse she was thinking of buying. After a while she asked:

"Whut does you know about makin' love to a woman, Tick?"

"Nothin'," Tick answered modestly.

"Ain't you never kissed no womens?" Dazzle asked incredulously.

"Yes'm."

"Well, what happened?"

"Dey batted me over de head wid de fust thing whut come handy. De las' one broke a puffeckly good settin'-chair on my noodle."

"Ain't you never hugged no womens?" Dazzle asked.

"I can't perzackly call it huggin'," Tick explained. "Quick as I grab 'em, dey squall an' fight an' ack like dey wus ag'in it."

Dazzle turned to Skeeter with an amazed question:

"Did you ever see de beat?"

Skeeter was evidently stricken dumb before such complete inexperience and such colossal ignorance.

Tick wadded his hat into a tight ball and waited while Dazzle thought out a course of instruction.

"All right, Ticky," she said, at last. "I'll set here on dis bench an' you come a-courtin' me. Do de very best you knows how, an' Skeeter kin stan' off on one side an' suggest improvements on de lesson."

Dazzle sat down and waited.

Tick fumbled with his hat, and breathed like a choking horse.

Skeeter stood like a motion-picture director looking at the actors in this drama of love.

"Git busy!" Skeeter howled.

"Whu—whut muss I do fust?" Tick growled.

"Kiss her—kiss her!" Skeeter ordered.

Tick sat down beside Dazzle, and started to kiss her. Then he backed away, and took up his position at the far end of the bench, looking at her with extreme embarrassment.

"Aw, shuckins!" Skeeter howled. "You kissed at dat purdy gal like a sick sheep lickin' salt! Don't be skeart you'll git too much—she ain't p'ison—git yo' five dollar's wuth!"

Tick Hush "sulled."

"I ain't gwine take no mo' lesson," he declared. "You-all is jes' prankin' wid me. I wants my five dollars back."

"Nothin' doin', Ticky," Dazzle laughed. "I ain't gwine git in de habit of givin' money back—it's too expensive. Bless Gawd, I ain't never gib none back yit. Come on wid yo' lessons!"

"I's jes' losin' time an' money monkeyin' wid you-alls," Tick growled. "You niggers is flimflamuxed me."

"Naw!" Skeeter howled. "You'll git yo' money's wuth. Lemme take yo' place an' show you how it is did!"

"You needn't apply, Skeeter," Dazzle grinned. "I's givin' dese here lessons. I'll let Tick set on de bench an' I'll show him how it oughter be did. Set down, Tick!"

Tick sat down on the bench with about as much

eagerness as a condemned man takes his seat in the electric chair. And he waited for what was to happen with about the same feeling that a man awaits the electric shock.

"Here's de way to do de kissin' ack," Dazzle exclaimed in her best stage voice.

She swept forward in her best stage manner and threw her eager arms around—empty air.

Tick bolted.

Skeeter Butts grabbed a tree, laid his head back between his shoulder blades, opened his mouth to its fullest extent, and laughed like a fool.

Tick got a Cherokee rosebush between himself and the histrionic beauty and took a lesson in watchful waiting.

"Ketch him, Dazzle," Skeeter screamed. "Ketch him—O my Lawd!"

His voice trailed off in demoniacal whoops of laughter like a wind-broken calliope, and Dazzle sat down with an astonishment which left her perfectly helpless.

In all her earthly career, she had never before found a man who bolted when she wanted to kiss him!

With a decisive gesture, she removed the five-dollar bill from the palm of her glove, and stood up, facing Tick Hush.

"Come here, Tick, an' git dis money!" she commanded.

"No'm," Tick chattered. "I wouldn't come even fer five dollars!"

"Come on! I won't kiss you—I jes' want to han' dis change back—honest!" Dazzle urged.

"Hang it on de rose bush an' git back about fawty feet!" Tick commanded. "I ain't trustin' nobody no more!"

Dazzle solemnly laid the bill upon a branch of the rose, piercing it with a thorn so that it would not fall to the ground.

"Tick," she said in a serious tone, "my advices to you is dis: You buy a real nice present fer dat gal of your'n wid dis money. Gib it to her an' tell her you wants to marry her, den ax her paw to throw you down an hawg-tie you ontil she kin git her fust engagement kiss. Good-by!"

Dazzle Zenor turned away from the two men, went straight to her room, and sat down before a mirror. For half an hour, she studied every feature of her face with critical inspection. But her silent inquiry was in vain. To the end of her life, she wondered why Tick had bolted when she had tried to kiss him!

As for Tick, he edged around the rosebush until he got within reaching distance of that five-dollar bill. He grabbed it and ran down the street as if he were chased by a dozen pretty women desirous of presenting him with an affectionate osculation.

Skeeter's maniacal laughter subsided to a hysterical giggle, as he watched Tick's precipitous flight.

"Dar now!" he snickered. "De kisser's gone an' pulled his freight to kiss her on some later date!"

Then Skeeter sat down on the bench where Tick had received his first and last lesson in the art of love, and smoked one cigarette after another, sighing frequently and thinking hard. He decided that Tick had lost the opportunity of a lifetime to be kissed by the

prettiest woman in the world, one who knew how to do it. Skeeter wished that he had had Tick's chance.

"Shuckins!" he said in deep disgust. "A nigger like Tick don't never know whut's good fer him!"

VII

BUTTON HOOK

Deeply embarrassed by his experience, and sorely perplexed over his difficulties, Tick Hush wandered down toward that portion of the town occupied by the whites, and stopped short in his meditations before a drug-store which carried a stock of cheap jewelry. He held his retrieved five-dollar bill in his sweating palm and looked into the dusty show-window.

"Dat nigger actor gimme one good tip," he murmured. "I'll buy my gal a real nice present, and take it to her when I git ready to express my bizzness."

He entered the drug-store timidly and leaned against a show-case.

"What you want, colored man?" the clerk asked.

"I wants a little gold fitten fer a cullud lady to wear on her," Tick grinned diffidently.

"Everything in this show-case comes up to your specifications in one respect," the clerk said flippantly. "There's mighty little gold about the stuff. What do you fancy?"

"Dunno, suh. I wants a view from you on dat."

"I've got it," the clerk said, as he lifted out a piece

of jewelry and held it up for inspection. "A wrist watch—just the thing—all the women wear them and every woman is crazy about them."

"How much do dat'n cost?" Tick inquired.

"Four-ninety-eight—let you have it for five dollars, cash!" the clerk responded.

"Thank 'e, suh. Dat's about de size of my little dab of money. Please wrop it up in a real nice box."

The clerk polished the piece of jewelry, wrapped it neatly, and Tick started for the home of Button Hook with the package in his hip pocket.

Button lived on the edge of the negro settlement known as Hell's Half-Acre, and Tick had no trouble learning whether or not she was at home, for he heard her voice, as high and as strident as the call of the katydid, singing a song which assured him:

"O love's my meat, an' love's my drink, an' love's my daily fare—an' Love an' me walks han' in han' when I has a han' to spare!"

Tick's method of presenting her with the wrist-watch was unique. He walked into the yard and knocked loudly upon the front door. Then he ran down to the street, laid his package in a conspicuous place on top of the gatepost, and hid behind a convenient stump upon the other side of the road to watch proceedings.

The girl came to the door and looked out. She spied the package and ran down after it. She unwrapped it, gave a squeal of delight, and ran back into the house.

"Dat made a fine hit!" Tick exclaimed, cutting a caper behind the stump.

He waited about ten minutes, then announced to himself:

"I reckin it's 'bout time I wus gwine in an' tellin' her who sont her dat gift."

He entered the yard and knocked loudly upon the door. Button Hook responded and Tick entered the house.

"Did you git a leetle somepin a while ago, Button?" he began.

"Naw," the girl responded.

"Didn't nobody leave you nothin' on dat gatepost out dar?" Tick asked in a surprised tone.

"Naw!" the girl answered.

She sat before him quietly, a small, tan-colored woman, with small eyes, small hands, and features as dull and expressionless as the face of a rag doll.

"My gosh," Tick howled. "Whut become of dat leetle gold wrist-watch I lef' on dat gatepost?"

"Did you leave one out dar?" Button asked innocently.

"Suttinly!" Tick said. "An' you got it, too. I know, because I peeped at you from behime a stump."

"Dat's right!" Button snickered.

"Whar is it?" Tick demanded.

"It didn't hab no name on it an' maw claimed it wus her'n," she told him.

"Huh," Tick grunted in despair. "Dat wus fer you—it was my weddin' present to you."

"Yo'—which?" the girl inquired in a startled tone.

"Yes'm," Tick plunged on. "You an' me is

gwine git married. It's Marse Tom Gaitskill's awd-ers—de Kunnel, an' Jedge Henry Lanark, an' Skeeter Butts—dey all agrees dat it's shore got to be."

The girl took a breath of astonishment which threatened to consume all the air in the room.

"Marse Tom says we kin live on de pest-house plantation. Dem deaders buried aroun' dar won't gib us no ketchin' disease. We got a good cabin an' plenty to eat, an' I'll make plenty dollars."

Then while Button Hook still gasped for air, Tick stood up. He assumed Dazzle Zenor's best stage manner, and swept down upon Button Hook to give her an imitation of Dazzle Zenor's best stage kiss.

And Button did just what Tick had done—she bolted.

She ran out of the room and left Tick to embrace the empty air.

"Huh!" Tick grunted. "Dazzle should had gib me anodder lesson so I would know whut to do now."

The windows in the room were closed tight, and Tick felt extremely warm. He tramped the floor for a few minutes, then took off his coat and hung it across the back of a chair.

"I reckin I better make myse'f at home an' wait till Buttons gits back," he soliloquized. "I don't know whut else to do. Mebbe she'll come back some time to-day."

In the rear of the house, Button's father was lying asleep on a pallet on the porch. He was an old man with long woolly hair, and long cork-screw whiskers; his feet were bare, and his body was clothed with a

pair of ragged pantaloons and a soiled, patched, yellowish undershirt.

"Wake up, pap," Button panted when she ran out of the room where Tick had tried to kiss her. "I got somepin to tell you."

"Whut's dat?" her parent inquired, rubbing his hands over his face and head and rumpling his hair and whiskers into a frightful disorder. "Whut you want?"

"A nigger man named Tick Hush is asettin' in de front room an' he wants to borrer yo' shotgun," Button told him.

"Shore!" old Hook exclaimed. "I'll loant Ticky de gun!"

He hastily lifted the gun down from two nails upon the kitchen wall, and in his frightful disarray, he went prancing into the front sitting-room. When he appeared in the doorway, Tick Hush looked up and beheld a barefooted, shirtless old man, with disheveled hair and beard, holding a double-barreled shotgun, and Tick had just made an unsuccessful attempt to kiss that old gentleman's lovely daughter!

"My Gawd!" Tick howled. "Somebody is got to take my place right now—it's vacant!"

He went through the nearest window without taking the trouble to raise the sash. There was a crash of glass, and Tick picked himself up from the ground where he had fallen, and broke the world's record for a half-mile dash.

He staggered into the Hen-Scratch saloon in the last stages of exhaustion and sank down weakly upon a chair.

Skeeter came and looked the fugitive over. His clothes were torn and covered with dust, and his face and head were bleeding from half a dozen slight cuts.

"Is you hurted, Ticky?" Skeeter asked sympathetically.

"I axed Button to marry me," Tick panted. "I ain't come away from no place as fast sence dat bear chased me through de swamp las' year."

"Did she take on much?" Skeeter snickered.

"Naw," Tick growled. "Her ole pap chased me wid a shotgun. I loped plum' acrost deir chicken-yard wid a winder sash hung aroun' my neck like a dawg-collar."

Skeeter bean to laugh.

"'Tain't no use to cackle, Skeeter," Tick exclaimed. "I's gwine up to Marse Tom Gaitskill's an' tell him dat I won't take charge of dat pest-house plantation at no price. I ain't gwine be pestered to death messin' wid mattermony no longer."

"Dat's too bad," Skeeter said.

Then he stopped with mouth agape.

The door of the saloon opened, and Button Hook was standing in the room.

Her afterthought had been better than her forethought. She had considered Tick's offer of marriage as soon as her father had chased him off the place, and had decided to take it. So now, she was hunting for her fugitive lover to entice him to renew his suit.

"Fer Heaven's sake, Ticky," she began, "whut made you run off so soon?"

"I needed some place fer to git," Ticky growled.

"Dat ole varmint wus fixin' to shoot me wid dat gun."

"'Tain't so!" Button exclaimed. "He jes' wanted to comverse you a little about de pest-house plantation—an' you busted a whole winder outen our cabin."

"I shore busted it," Tick agreed. "I's gwine bust one eve'y time a nigger wants to comverse me wid a shotgun."

"Dat wus jes' a joke, Ticky," Button smiled, patting him on the shirt-sleeve where a slight cut showed the red. "I was prankin' wid you all de time. Maw didn't had dat watch; I had it hid behime de big clock in de very room whar you wus settin' at."

Button dropped her left hand down Tick's arm until it rested upon his wrist. Tick looked, and saw his wrist watch clasped around her small brown arm.

"Did you really mean whut you wus sayin' in my house, Ticky?" she asked.

"Yes'm," Tick replied.

"I'm wid you in dat offer, Ticky," Button said easily. "I says—Yes!"

"Listen to dat word!" Skeeter Butts exploded. "De arrangements is all sottled up—you's got her, Ticky!"

Tick looked like a man who had drawn a grand prize in the lottery.

"Honey, you shore is lifted a weight offen my mind," he assured her.

"I's gwine expeck you up at my house to-night, Ticky," Button told him as she started out. "You

lef' yo' coat hangin' on a chair in de front settin'-room an' you got to come an' git it."

A moment after she had passed out Skeeter exclaimed:

"Telephome Marse Tom Gaitskill, Ticky. Tell him to git out dem pair of cotehouse licenses befo' de clerk's office shuts up. Hurry!"

VIII

"WHAT'S IN A NAME?"

Colonel Tom Gaitskill left the bank and walked across the street to the office of the clerk of the Third District Court.

"I want a colored marriage license, Mack," he remarked as he leaned against the desk and began the ceremonial process of lighting a big cigar.

The deputy clerk grinned and opened a big book.

"What's the man's name?" he asked.

"Tick Hush."

"Who's the lady of color?" the clerk inquired, as his pen scratched on the paper.

Gaitskill's hand paused, holding a lighted match about two inches from the end of his cigar. He held it there until the flame scorched his fingers. He dropped the match and sucked the blisters, uttering sundry expletives as sulfurous as the head of the match. Then he gave himself up to thought.

"Let me see," he said. "Do you know I forgot to ask that negro what woman he was going to marry?"

He struck another match and lighted his cigar.

He puffed like a steamboat for a minute, and spoke again:

"I was talking to Tick last night and he mentioned two negro women, Limit and Vakey. Now I wonder which one he decided to marry?"

"Which is the best cook?" the clerk grinned.

"Limit Lark, I presume," the Colonel answered. "Limit cooks for Judge Lanark—ah, that's the one. I remember now, because Judge Lanark was sitting on the porch with me at the time and I heard him complain that he was about to lose his cook—make out the license for Tick Hush and Limit Lark!"

The clerk quickly completed the document, collected two dollars and fifty cents of the banker's money, and handed over the long envelope.

"How many of these licenses have you bought in your life, Mr. Gaitskill?"

"Two barrels full," Gaitskill chuckled. "It's a good investment. Courthouse marriages, as the negroes call them, stick better, and the negroes seem to get along with less fuss."

Slipping the envelope in his pocket, he walked out. When he reached his home about dark, he found Tick Hush sitting under a tree waiting for him.

"Did you git dem pair of marriage license, Marse Tom?" Tick asked eagerly.

"Here is the document," Gaitskill said, handing it to the grinning negro.

Tick seized it with trembling fingers, opened it hastily, then glared at it with popping eyeballs.

"Lawdymussy, Marse Tom!" he exclaimed.

"You done had dem license made out fer de wrong gal."

"How's that?"

"Yes, suh, dat's suttingly a miscue, kunnel. Dis paper says dat I's gwine marry Limit Lark, but de real gal is Button Hook!"

"Aw, shucks!" Gaitskill exclaimed disgustedly. "I couldn't remember what the woman's name was. I don't think you ever mentioned Button Hook to me. Give that paper back. I'll have it changed."

"Will it cost some more money to git it changed, kunnel?"

"I suppose the clerk will charge about a dollar for his extra work," Gaitskill said. "I think I'll let you pay that dollar—you ought to have telephoned me the woman's name."

Gaitskill pocketed the license and entered his home. Tick went out on the street and sat down on the pavement curbing with his feet in the gutter.

"Marse Tom is shore messed up dis bizzness awful bad," he sighed to himself. "Dat white man is chargin' me a puffeckly good dollar because he made a miscue. Dat ain't right."

He thought the matter over for a while and then broke into a low chuckle.

"By gosh, I b'lieve I'll try dat on."

He hastened down the street to Skeeter Butts.

"Loant me five dollars, Skeeter!" he exclaimed earnestly. "Marse Tom is done made a mistake wid dat weddin' paper an' I wants to git it fixed up right soon. He says it'll cost me a dollar."

The name of Gaitskill worked the miracle of liber-

ality in Skeeter, and he handed over the money without a word of protest.

"Now I's done got financial agin," Tick panted, as he stepped rapidly along the street.

Suddenly a tremendous idea struck his brain and shocked him to a standstill. He leaned weakly against a convenient fence and waited till he could recover. Then he began to laugh so loud that a number of pickaninnies trotted out of the cabins and came across to where they could observe him with closer scrutiny.

"I's done thunk up de onliest good idear I's had sence dis bizziness started," he exclaimed to himself. "I's gwine peg it down befo' de wind blows it away."

He went straight to the kitchen of Judge Henry Lanark, where Limit Lark was serving as cook. He held an earnest and satisfactory conversation with her for about five minutes, and then hurried to the home of Colonel Gaitskill. Gaitskill was sitting upon the front porch.

"Marse Tom," Tick began eagerly, "is you had dem license changed yit?"

"No."

"I's glad of dat, kunnel," Tick chuckled. "I don't want 'em changed a-tall!"

"Why is that?"

"I done decided to marry Limit Lark, Marse Tom," Tick explained. "I talked it up wid Limit an' she agreed wid me."

"I thought you loved Button Hook," Gaitskill protested.

"I does love her pretty good, kunnel," Tick snick-

ered. "But I been thinkin' it over, an' you wus gwine charge me a dollar to change de names in dem license, an' I figger dat dar ain't a dollar's wuth of diffunce between dem two nigger womens!"

Having made this arrangement by which he had secured a marriage license, the promise of a wife, the loan of five dollars which he never expected to repay, and the saving of one dollar of his funds, Tick sauntered away with a big chunk of tobacco in his cheek and a large gob of peace in his soul.

Which goes to show that Tick's social education was progressing.

In the mean time, Button Hook was carefully cleaning up the room in her home for the entertainment of Tick Hush when he fulfilled his promise to call that night and make the final arrangements for their wedding.

In that same room, Button found Tick's coat. He had not taken it with him when her father appeared with the shotgun.

With her first thought of wifely care, she picked up the coat, brushed it until it was free from dust, then gave it a hard shake.

Two letters fell to the floor.

Button stooped and picked them up. One was addressed to Miss Limit Lark, and the other to Miss Vakey Vapp.

Then, with true wifely curiosity, Button opened both letters and read them. Except for the superscription, they were exactly the same.

Almost every sentence was preceded by the word—"say." Button could not understand that, for she

did not know that Tick had dictated while Skeeter had written the letters, and Skeeter was not experienced in writing dictation.

Here is an absolutely accurate transcription of what Button read:

D one

say this thought come to Me to Address you of Helth this Letr im wel and i truste this wil find you Enjoin Life

say i aint so faraway i cant come & see you but dont thing Hord of me for Not coming i were call away i wil Be Back to Morrer Nite

say if you want to See Me i want to See You the yorse in the world but i Wil Weight ontil i Here from you

say i want to ef you have Made up yo mine at Marring i want to Before Ten Das i Got a Job at Moss Tm Gatskills farm wher the pess Hous is at say the farm is only 8 Mile from you it is a short Diston if you want to see it say if you want to come out Here and look at the Plase i wil take you say im fixt to go to Work Now say im runing the Pest Farm im Geting 15D a month

say B swete as you can B

say we wil Do fine when we ar working to Gether

say i am making all these Dols for you & i and Dont tel me Noh because i M Bisnes.

say i am Not Goin With No other one i Have my Hold Hart & mine on you & no other

say if you say Yess meat me at sickmore tre Behine the Shoefli ch to Morrer Nite say I am looking for you at the ch

say Dont lett me be DCd in you

yos T

Tick Hush

When Button had deciphered this communication she placed both letters back in their envelopes and

hid them behind the clock. Then she removed the little brass wrist-watch which Tick had given her from her arm and placed that with the two letters.

After that she turned around and addressed aloud the chair upon which Tick's coat had rested:

"I wonder whut pap done wid dat double-barrel shotgun of his'n?"

She threw Tick's coat disdainfully upon the floor, and stamped it with her feet.

"I's gwine vowlate de law!" she announced. "I's gwine scramble de remainders of Tick Hush all over Tickfall. Ef dey gits enough of him to hold a funeral over, dey'll have to mop de pieces up wid a rag!"

She walked back to the porch in the rear of the house, and lifted down the heavy muzzle-loading shotgun. She examined it carefully, muttering threats.

"Lemme think," she mumbled. "I b'lieve pap said when you gits ready to shoot you cocks back bofe hammers an' pulls bofe triggers!"

She stepped out into the yard, the gun resting upon her arm.

"Soon as it gits good dark, I'll start," she murmured. "I muss git him befo' de moon rises!"

IX

TICK CELEBRATES

"I shore am feelin' fine to-night," Tick muttered, as he walked away from Gaitskill's home. "I feels like a cel'bration of some kind. De fust notion whut comes acrost my head, I'll back it."

Feeling hungry, he wandered toward the Shin Bone eating-house, and there, near the entrance, he met Dazzle Zenor.

"How am de love case gittin' on, Ticky?" she giggled.

"Eve'ything is done sot an' settled," Tick grinned back. "Dat piece of love lesson you gimme wus suttinly a plenty."

"You oughter stayed through it all, honey," Dazzle smiled. "I'd 'a' learnt you how to flash de glad eye, how to hold yo' gal's hand, how to hug her so tight she'd holler fer her mammy, an' how to bite yo' name in her cheek."

"I didn't need dat many lessons," Tick informed her.

"Rememberin' dat you ain't paid me nothin' fer whut I did learn you, it seems nachel to me dat you oughter buy me somepin to eat," Dazzle suggested.

"Dat'll suit me," Tick exclaimed. "I ain't got de same five dollars whut you gib me back, but I got anodder five whut is jes' as good."

It did not occur to Tick until afterward that it is not wise to tell an actress how much money you have in your possession when you take her out to supper.

Dazzle revealed a perfectly amazing appetite for both food and drink. She wanted her food cooked in sundry unique and most expensive ways, and she wanted a mixture of drinks which were several times as expensive as any that Tick had ever had to pay for.

For two hours they sat at the table laughing and talking, and Dazzle found that she had merely to flat-

ter Tick about his social accomplishments to get him to go the limit financially.

Finally Dazzle announced that she had to go, and refused to let Tick accompany her to her destination.

Left alone in the restaurant, Tick counted his change and found that less than fifty cents remained of the five dollars which Skeeter had lent him.

He left the restaurant, entered a nearby saloon, and invested some more of his money in drink. When he reappeared upon the street he possessed one silver dime and a jag.

"Huh," he grunted, as he looked down at the battered dime. "I's suttinly pretty well 'luminated up to now. Wonder how come I still got dis here little dime? I b'lieve I'll buy a watermellyum."

He entered the restaurant again, purchased a large melon, and staggered solemnly down the street, hugging it in his arms. He walked into a little grove of trees and sat down on the ground.

By this time his ideas were extremely vague.

He cut his watermelon in two halves, carving across the middle; he surveyed both ends with ludicrous gravity, cogitating deeply.

Then remembering that he had left his hat in the Shin Bone eating-house, he scooped all the red meat out of one end of his melon, and turned the empty rind over his head, fitting it on his skull like a cap! Thinking at the same time that he needed a chair, he scooped the red meat out of the other end of the melon, and sat down in that half of the empty rind. Having made himself comfortable, he proceeded with his meal!

"Hey!" he bawled to the world at large. "Dinner's ready! Come an' git it!"

The thunder roared, and a summer shower, driven before a strong Gulf breeze, swept over Tickfall. It was gone in five minutes, and the moon came out clear and bright, but the rain had drenched Tick Hush to the skin.

"It's a good thing I fotch my hat out here wid me," he mumbled, holding the watermelon rind on his head. "I mought ketch cold ef my head gits wet. Gotter take keer of myse'f—gwine git married."

The cold water had a slightly sobering effect upon him, and he suddenly realized that he was without his coat.

"Dar now! I done lef' dat coat at Button Hook's house, an' I done decided not to marrify Button. Dat's bad luck! I'll go ax Skeeter Butts 'bout dat!"

Still holding his watermelon-rind hat upon his wabbly head, he staggered slowly down the street, balancing himself carefully as he walked up the steps of the saloon and entered the swinging door.

Then he stumbled and threw out both hands to steady himself. His unique hat fell to the floor breaking into a hundred fragments, and splashing to all parts of the room. Tick gave a low moan of sorrow, stepped on a piece of the melon, slid about ten feet, and sat down upon the floor with a jolt which almost loosened his ears.

He got to his feet with difficulty, motioned mysteriously to Skeeter, and led the way to the room in the rear.

"Bad luck, Skeeter!" he growled. "I done messed my mattermony up agin."

"Slop it out!" Skeeter snapped. "Whut you done now?"

"Button Hook is done promise to marry me, an' Limit Lark is done promise to marry me, an' Dazzle Zenor is done promise to marry me—leastwise, I think she done it. I cain't remember real good."

"Why cain't you remember?" Skeeter snarled.

"I's so full of booze my y-ears is stopped up an' my back teeth is a-floatin'," Tick explained.

"I know dat! Go on!"

"Whut griefs my mind is dis," Tick went on. "I lef' my coat wid dem two marrifyin' letters in it down at Button's house; Button is got my wrist-watch, an' I ain't gwine marry Button!"

"Aw, good gosh!" Skeeter exclaimed disgustedly.

"Whut is de most properest thing fer me to do nex', Skeeter?" Tick inquired with alcoholic gravity.

"You better do like a mud-turtle do!" Skeeter snarled.

"How do a mud-turtle ack under dem succumstances?" Tick inquired.

"When a turtle gits in trouble, he puts his hands an' foots in his pocket, takes a big breath, an' swallers his head, den he rolls offen a log an' stays under de water fer fawty days," Skeeter informed him.

"Dat's onpossible fer me to do, Skeeter," Tick replied earnestly. "I'd git drowndead shore, an' Marse Tom don't want no harm to happen to me."

"'Twouldn't be no great big loss," Skeeter snap-

ped. "It 'pears to me like I could do widout you powerful easy."

"De lady folks would miss me," Tick said with a drunken grin.

"Git outen here, Tick, befo' I git you put in jail," Skeeter howled. "You is a noosunce."

"Don't go back on yo' lodge brudder, Skeeter," Tick begged. "Tell me whut to do to git outen my jam."

"All right," Skeeter said ungraciously. "Go down to Button Hook an' git yo' coat, yo' letters, an' yo' wrist-watch back—an' I hopes to Gawd dat Button Hook will chaw you up an' spit you out!"

"Marse Tom don't want his pest-house nigger ruint like dat!" Tick protested.

Skeeter pushed him out of the back door and returned to the barroom.

Thus dismissed, Tick went slowly toward the cabin occupied by Button Hook. Then he thought of something which quickened his footsteps and gave him courage.

"I won't hab no trouble to git my coat back. I jumped through dat winder an' busted it to smash-ereens, an' of co'se it will be open."

He sneaked up to the house from the side nearest to the woods, and approached the window with the utmost caution. Climbing in over the broken frame, he felt about the room until he located his coat. Thrusting his hand into the inside pocket, he brought it out empty.

"Dey's gone!" he sighed. "Mo' an' mo' trouble all de time!"

He stood thinking and listening until his attention was attracted by the loud ticking of a clock in the room.

"I gitcher!" he grinned. "Button said she hid de wrist-watch behime de clock."

He thrust his hand between the wall and the clock, and in a hollow space behind the timepiece, he found the watch and the two envelopes.

"Huh," he grunted, "dese here is shore my losted letters. De Lawd am shorely wid me."

Climbing cautiously and noiselessly out of the window, he walked out of the front gate, and, all danger being over, he started jauntily down the street. He felt care-free and happy once more, and he began to sing.

Several hundred yards down the road Button Hook heard him, and concealed herself behind a clump of bushes. She carried a double-barreled, muzzle-loading shotgun, and she had the face and manner of one who was determined to use it.

Button had been hunting through all the negro settlements of the town for the man who was now approaching, singing at the top of his voice. She listened to the song with an ugly smile upon her lips:

"Look on de sunny side,
Git on de sunny side,
Stay on de sunny side
Of life!"

The song ended in a howl of fright.

Tick Hush came to a stand with both hands outstretched to ward off the attack of a girl who stood in

the middle of the moonlit road with a shotgun at her shoulder.

"Git ready to die, Ticky!" she snarled. "Dis am de end of you!"

Then both barrels of the gun went off at about the same time.

Tick went off, too.

Fortunately for Tick, Button Hook was not familiar with the use of firearms. She had heard her father say that his old shotgun kicked like a yearling mule. She was afraid of the gun, afraid of the noise it made, and afraid of the kick. She had held it far from her shoulder to avoid the rebound, had shut both her eyes, and pulled both triggers. When the gun went off she dropped it on the ground, and went home at full speed, squalling at every step.

Tick leaped to one side of the road, tore both legs off his pantaloons at the knee clambering over a barbed-wire fence, and went howling through the woods, bumping against nearly every tree in his flight.

Like a crawfish, Tick went forward and looked back.

When at last he felt that he had escaped from danger, he was bleeding from a number of wounds on his head, bleeding at both knees, bleeding where the barbed-wire had cut his lips, and his nose was a spouting fountain of red.

"I'll go ax Skeeter Butts 'bout dis," the wretched man moaned.

When he staggered into the Hen-Scratch saloon he made a big sensation. Negroes were standing at

the bar, others were playing pool, some were engaged at various games at the table, and a big group was assembled in the center of the room singing, cracking jokes, and laughing as they smoked. The crowd sprang up and rushed forward as Tick stumbled in, sobbing like a little child.

"My Gawd, niggers!" he howled. "Marse Tom is got to git him anodder nigger. Dis'n is plum' ruint. Send fer de dorctor! I's been helt up an' robbed an' shotted to death!"

X

TICK SEEKS A PLACE TO DIE

Tick flopped over on a battered pool-table, and dyed the green cloth red with his blood.

A bunch of negroes gathered close around the table, cackling their comments like a flock of excited hens.

"I heerd dat gun go off!" Figger Bush squeaked. "Dey shot him twicet. Dat gun went bang! bang!"

"Us heerd it, too," Hitch Diamond growled. "He shore is bad hurted. Dey shot bofe de legs off his pants. I 'speck he fixin' to die!"

Skeeter Butts talked excitedly over the telephone and five minutes later a big automobile stopped in front of his place, and Dr. Moseley came in.

"Get all these niggers out of here, Skeeter!" he commanded sharply. "Clear the house!"

The negroes tramped out of the door like a drove of horses going through a gap, and then they scat-

tered to all parts of the town to carry the dreadful news.

Dr. Moseley's examination failed to find a single gunshot wound.

"You are not shot, Tick," Moseley said. "You've been lying to these friends of yours. Somebody beat you over the head with a club."

"Naw, suh; dat warn't it, doc," Tick insisted. "I wus shotted wid bofe barrels of a shotgun!"

"Tick don't know whut happened, doc," Skeeter commented. "He come in here 'bout a hour ago so full of booze dat he sloshed like a water-wagon when he walked."

Moseley bandaged the cut lips and legs and the bruised head, and left Tick to the care and nursing of Skeeter Butts.

"Yes, suh; I'll set up wid him all night, doc," Skeeter said. "He's a fool frien' of mine."

Skeeter was aching to know exactly what had happened to Tick, and as soon as the physician left, Tick was served with a drink which sobered him almost immediately, and then he told Skeeter all about his affair in the road.

When Tick had finished, Skeeter sat for a long time in deep thought, at intervals grunting like a pig when some new idea punched him in a new place.

At last he rose to his feet and got his hat.

"Ticky," he said, "you stay here till I gits back."

"Suttinly," Tick said pitifully. "I's skeart to go anywhar else; lock all de doors up tight."

Skeeter ran across lots to his home on the premises of Sheriff John Flournoy.

Flournoy had a little automobile, which he used for fishing and hunting trips, and Skeeter pushed this out of the garage, cranked it, and jumped to the seat. In a few minutes he was back again at the saloon.

"Climb in dis machine, Ticky," he commanded. "A leetle fresh air will rest yo' mind an' do you good. Git in!"

Then Skeeter steered the machine straight toward the home of Button Hook. Tick uttered angry and frightened protests, but in vain. Skeeter persisted in his plan.

"Dis is whar it happened, Skeeter," Tick said as they passed a place in the road. "Dis is whar I wus shotted!"

"Whoa!" Skeeter said, as he brought the car to a stop. "Look dar—dat is de gun whut Button drapped!"

Placing the gun in the machine, Skeeter hurried on toward Button Hook's home.

"Dis gun will he'p me a heap!" he exulted.

When they reached the house, Skeeter picked up the shotgun and, leaving Tick in the machine, he walked through the yard stamped up the steps and onto the little porch, and knocked loudly and authoritatively upon the door. He heard shuffling noises with low talking, and movements which indicated that the occupants of the house were waking from sleep and getting out of bed.

"Who dar?" old man Hook inquired in a frightened voice.

"Open up!" Skeeter yelled. "I got a little word

wid you an' Button Hook from Sheriff John Flournoy an' Doc Moseley."

At this there was a frightened squeal from Button Hook, excited voices talking, swift movement of feet, and the door opened a little crack. Old Hook stuck his corkscrew whiskers through the opening and asked:

"Whut word is sont?"

"I's got Ticky Hush out here in Sheriff John Flournoy's autermobile," Skeeter announced in a loud voice. "Ticky is been shot two times wid a double-barrel, muzzle-loadin' shotgun. Nobody ain't know who done it, but we done foun' de shotgun, an' Marse Tom is tryin' to find out who owns it."

Button Hook uttered a frightened whine.

"Doc Moseley say Ticky is gittin' ready to die befo' mawnin'," Skeeter resumed. "Ticky ain't got no kinnery an' I knowed he wus gwine marry Button Hook, so I fotch him down here so he could die in yo'-all's house!"

"Gawda'mighty, naw!" old Hook wailed. "I don't want no dead nigger in my cabin. Take him somewheres else."

"It's Marse John Flournoy's awders to leave him here wid you-alls!" Skeeter lied.

"Naw!" Daddy Hook squalled. "Dis fambly ain't gwine be home in de mawnin'—us is gittin' ready trabble to right now, an' we's fixin' to take a soon start!"

"Does you know who dis shotgun belongs to?" Skeeter asked, producing the gun with a dramatic flourish.

"Naw!" Daddy Hook wailed, motioning Skeeter away. "Ain't never seed dat gun befo'."

A frightened wail sounded behind old man Hook, informing Skeeter that Button was being strongly affected by what she heard.

"All right!" Skeeter said, as if in doubt what to do next. "I'll go tell Marse John Flournoy dat you-all won't take Tick in. I reckon him an' Marse Tom Gaitskill will come right down an' cornverse you-all about it. De Sheriff don't take no nigger foolishness."

Skeeter turned and walked away. When he got to the automobile it was empty. Tick had climbed out and had hidden behind the same stump which had served him when he delivered the wrist-watch to Button Hook. As Skeeter cranked the machine, Tick emerged from his hiding-place and climbed back into the car.

"Now, Ticky," Skeeter said when they were once more in the saloon and had sat down. "A long time befo' mawnin', Button Hook an' all dat crowd will be gittin' to some place fur away in a mighty big hurry. Dey'll trabble wid a looseness, an' dey won't look back, an' dey won't never come back."

"Dey won't make me mad ef dey stays away," Tick spoke, trying to grin through his cut and plaster-covered lips.

"Dat saves yo' life, an' it gits you good riddunce of one of yo' to-be wives!"

"Thank 'e, suh," Tick said gratefully. "You shore is a noble nigger man!"

"You tole me dat Dazzle promise to marry you—is dat so?"

"Naw, suh. Me an' Dazzle et a little dinner togedder, but dar ain't nothin' to dat."

"Dat leaves jes' Limit Lark fer you to marry—ain't dat so?" Skeeter asked.

"Dat's all!" Tick said. "Thank de Lawd!"

"You done got yo' license to marry Limit, Ticky," Skeeter said. "Now, fer goodness sake don't ax nobody else!"

"I won't," Tick promised. "I's mighty glad we's done shaved 'em down to jes' me an' one woman."

There was a loud knock upon the front door, and some one on the outside shook it violently, trying to get in.

"Git over dar an' crawl under de bar, Ticky," Skeeter whispered. "Dar ain't no tellin' whut is gwine happen now!"

When Tick was hidden, Skeeter tiptoed to the door and opened it very cautiously.

"Dis here is Vakey Vapp," a woman's voice announced in high, shrill tones. "Lemme in, I got somepin to say offen my mind!"

"Come in, Vakey," Skeeter said in propitiating tones. "I's de onliest one here."

"Whar is Tick Hush?" Vakey snapped.

"Tick is gittin' ready to die," Skeeter answered evasively. "Doc Moseley is he'pin' him along."

"I come here to tell Tick dat he better make a good job of dyin', an' drap off real soon," Vakey bellowed. "Ef he don't, I's gwine meet him in de big road an' cyarve his gizzard an' his backbone out!"

"Whut's done made you mad?" Skeeter asked in surprised tones.

"Dat nigger is done monkeyed wid my affectations," Vakey howled.

"Dat's too bad," Skeeter sympathized.

"It don't hurt me none, but it's shore bad fer Tick!" Vakey said in a deadly tone.

Then they sat for a long time in silence, while Vakey Vapp breathed deeply with a heaving breast, like a motion-picture star. At last she stood up to go.

"I comed here to gib Ticky Hush a dyin' message, Skeeter," she announced. "I's sorry he ain't here. But ef Doc Moseley makes a mistake an' cures Tick, well, I's gwine bestow my dyin' message wid de edge of a sharp razor. Good-by!"

When the door closed behind her, Tick stood up from his hiding-place, showing a face full of tragedy and despair.

"We forgot all about dat one, Skeeter," he mourned. "Oh, lawdy! Ef I ever gits outen dis mess, I ain't gwine mess wid mattermony no more!"

XI

TICK FLIES THE YELLOW FLAG

Early the next morning, Colonel Tom Gaitskill heard from Hitch Diamond, who worked about his place, that Tick Hush had been held up, robbed, and shot to death.

At the bank, where Vinegar Atts worked, Gaitskill heard that a woman named Button Hook had shot Tick Hush, and that Skeeter had nursed him all night.

From Dr. Moseley Gaitskill learned that Tick had

not been shot or robbed, but had been beaten over the head with some blunt instrument, and his face had been badly cut with some sharp tool.

All of which was interesting enough to induce Gaitskill to make a personal investigation.

He found Tick Hush lying upon a pallet in the rear of the Hen-Scratch saloon, and from him and Skeeter Butts he heard the whole story.

Being familiar with the details of numberless negro courtships, this lengthy narrative lacked the spice of novelty, and Gaitskill was weary long before it was finished.

At last he looked at his watch and rose to his feet.

"Well, Tick," he smiled, "I think if I were in your predicament I would go out to the pest-house on my farm and run up the yellow flag."

Then Gaitskill went back to the bank.

The two negroes sat in perfect silence for a long time. Finally Tick asked:

"Skeeter, whut did Marse Tom mean by dem words?"

"Gawd knows," Skeeter mumbled.

Skeeter smoked four cigarettes in rapid succession. Then the meaning of Gaitskill's remark shot through him like an electric current.

Given Gaitskill's two, he multiplied and made forty-four.

He grabbed his hat and ran up the street at full speed.

He stopped first at the home of Ginny Babe Chew, where he held an excited conversation with Dazzle Zenor, the actress. That young woman laughed and

applauded, and promptly left the house after Skeeter's rapid departure.

After that, he ran to the livery stable and held an excited conversation with the negro owner of that establishment.

The liveryman was not at all disposed to do what Skeeter wanted, but Skeeter had learned certain conjuring tricks to attain his ends, and he now performed these tricks with the influential names of Colonel Tom Gaitskill, Sheriff John Flournoy, and Dr. Moseley.

With these big names thundering in his ears, the liveryman consented.

"Keep dis quiet, Lon!" Skeeter warned. "It's de white folks' awders. Don't speak a word!"

Two hours later, a long, black carriage, known to the negroes of Tickfall as the "pest-wagon," drawn by two solemn mules and driven by Skeeter Butts, stopped at the rear door of the Hen-Scratch saloon.

Skeeter dismounted from the driver's seat and opened the door in the rear of the ambulance. Hitch Diamond, Figger Bush, and the Reverend Vinegar Atts climbed out. They pulled a stretcher into view, and Skeeter laid hold upon it.

They tramped into the Hen-Scratch saloon like a quartette of pall-bearers, and walked to the pallet where Dazzle Zenor, the actress, now acting the part of a Red Cross nurse, had just completed a major operation upon the face and hands of Tick Hush. Tick was lifted upon the stretcher, carried to the ambulance and placed inside.

Skeeter tied a piece of yellow cloth a yard wide

and two yards long to the door knob of the ambulance, and climbed back to the driver's seat.

The four stretcher bearers walked solemnly beside the pest-wagon.

Every negro inhabitant of Dirty-Six crowded the sidewalks and watched this dreadful wagon go by. All the older ones recalled that fearful epidemic of yellow fever years before when this wagon had rolled along the streets at midnight, and a driver with muffled mouth, breathing through a cloth saturated with disinfectants, called aloud in sepulchral tones:

"Bring out your dead!"

For the first time in thirty years, the pest-wagon was on the streets of Tickfall again. It was no longer a shiny, black vehicle, but was rusty, dusty, weather-beaten, and time-worn, more than ever suggestive of diseases and pestilence and sudden death.

As the stretcher bearers marched, they sang. The superb baritone of the Reverend Vinegar Atts rolled like an organ:

"Somebody buried in de graveyard,
Somebody buried in de sea;
Gwine to git up in de mawnin'
Shoutin' de jubilee.
If you git dare befo' I do,
Run an' tell de Lawd I'm comin', too.
Oh!
Somebody dyin' on de mountain,
Somebody dyin' in de bed,
Somebody gwine to rise like a fountain,
Gwine to rise from de dead!

Oh!
If you git dar befo' I do,
Run an' tell de Lawd I'm comin', too!"

"Git back, niggers!" Hitch Diamond bellowed to the crowd when he saw they were disposed to follow. "Keep away! I got awders from de white folks!"

In front of the home of Vakey Vapp the ambulance came to a stop.

"Come out here, Vakey!" Skeeter called.

Vakey stepped out into the middle of her yard with plenty of fresh, untainted air around her.

"You tole me las' night dat you wanted to deliver to Tick Hush a dyin' message!" Skeeter exclaimed as he opened the door of the ambulance. "Come up close so you kin speak to him!"

Vakey took a half-step forward and stopped.

Skeeter spread wide the doors of the ambulance and exclaimed dramatically:

"Stick out yo' head, Ticky, an' git yo' dyin' word!"

Ticky stuck out his head.

Dazzle Zenor had done her work well.

The actress had exhausted all her paints and all her mental resources in helping Tick in his theatrical make-up for the part he had to play.

The result was simply horrifying!

Tick's ears were both a bright green in color, his nose was yellow, his lips were purple, his forehead was a bright red, and his cheeks were as white as milk, while under his chin the natural brown of his skin was striped with orange!

Tick held up both hands with a pitiful gesture, and each finger was a different color!

Vakey Vapp emitted a squall which put her in a class by herself as a maker of strange, loud noises.

"Pore ole Ticky is got some kind of ketchin' disease, Vakey," Skeeter exclaimed. "Us is takin' him out to de pest-house."

"Whut ails him?" Vakey wailed.

"Doc Moseley specify dat Tick is got scrambaloodums, an' it's powerful ketchin'. Is you touched Ticky any time recent?"

"O Lawd yes!" Vakey screamed. "I rush-housed him powerful bad at de Shoofly chu'ch de yuther night!"

"I's mighty sorry to hear you speak dem words, Vakey," Skeeter said with a tearful tremolo in his voice. "You'll kotch de scrambaloodums, too. We'll come back an' take you to de pest-house next!"

Skeeter shut the ambulance door and ostentatiously draped the yellow flag over the knob.

"You fergot to deliver yo' dyin' message, Vakey," Skeeter reminded her.

"'Tain't nothin'," Vakey howled. "O my lawdy-mussy!"

"All right," Skeeter said. "You kin speak yo' dyin' words when we takes you out to de pest-house whar Tick is gwine!"

Vakey gave another loud squall and started across the fields toward the woods, going at full speed, and covering a long distance in a very brief time.

"She'll be mighty fur away pretty soon—ef she

keeps up dat gait," the Reverend Vinegar Atts chuckled. "Dat's jes' de way de niggers runned from de pest-house thirty years ago!"

Skeeter clucked to his mules and started off at a brisk trot, leaving the three other stretcher bearers in the middle of the road, looking at the cloud of dust the team raised.

"Come on, niggers," Vinegar Atts chuckled as he turned back toward the town. "We done runned Vakey off now—less git aroun' among de niggers an' succulate de repote dat Skeeter an' Tick is gittin' ready to git up a show!"

"Dat's right!" Figger Bush cackled. "We'll tell 'em dis ain't no real disease, but Tick an' Skeeter is rehearsin'!"

"'Tain't really needful to do dat," Hitch Diamond rumbled. "Excusin' Vakey, all of 'em knows it 'tain't nothin' but a joke nohow. Niggers didn't sing no religium tunes aroun' dis pest-wagon thuty year ago when de yeller fever kotch us."

XII

LIMIT GOES THE LIMIT

Two hours later, a wagon drawn by two mules, and occupied by three men and one woman, stopped on top of a hill near the pest-house.

With shouts of laughter the four colored people looked down at the four-room stone house with the metal roof, behind which were many graves and leaning tombstones.

In front of the building was a yellow flag, draped from the limb of a small tree. Skeeter Butts sat in front, his chair-back propped against the stone wall, smoking his cigarette.

They climbed out of the wagon, Limit Lark, the Reverend Vinegar Atts, Figger Bush, and Hitch Diamond.

After consulting with his two male companions, Vinegar Atts conducted Limit Lark to a little knoll about one hundred feet from the pest-house, and told her to stand there until he could complete his arrangements.

Then he took his own stand on another little rise of land, with Figger Bush and Hitch Diamond beside him.

"Hey, Tick Hush!" Vinegar bawled in a voice which could be heard a mile. "Come out to de front of de pest-house a minute!"

Tick had been busy trying to get the make-up off his face, and he emerged from the building and stared about him in surprise.

"Listen, Tick!" Vinegar Atts whooped. "I got somepin to say to you. Will you take Limit Lark to be yo' wedded wife?"

"Suttinly!" Tick squalled, after a moment of astonished silence and a kick from Skeeter Butts.

"Limit, will you take Tick Hush to be yo' wedded husbunt?" Vinegar bellowed.

"You bet!" Limit shrieked.

"Jine yo' right hands!" Vinegar howled.

"Aw, dat won't do to say," Hitch Diamond growled. "It cain't be did."

Vinegar hesitated a moment, then got his second wind and bawled:

"I now pernounce you husbunt an' wife, an' may de good Lawd hab mussy on yo' souls. Amen!"

"Come away from dis pest-house, Tick!" Skeeter snapped as soon as the ceremony was ended. "I been skeart to death fer eve'y minute I been here, an' I's smoked cigareetes to keep de ketchin' miseries away till I sees double!"

The two men ran up the hill toward Limit Lark.

Limit took one horrified look at her husband's face and reeled backward.

Dazzle Zenor had failed to tell Tick how to get the make-up off his face, and now he was an awful looking thing.

He had rubbed the various paints with a dry cloth and had made a horrifying smear; he had washed the paints with hot and cold water, and some of the colors had "run," and the effect was one which would make any alcoholic imagine he had 'em again and mount the water-wagon.

"My Gawd, Ticky!" Limit shrieked. "How come you got yo' face in such a devilish mess?"

"I's had bad luck, honey," Tick said mournfully. "I s'pose I got to wait till dis paint wears off!"

"You ain't nothin' but a gorm!" Limit shrieked. "You look like a Whut-is-it in a circus show!"

"Cain't he'p it, honey," Tick replied. "It'll wear off in about six months!"

"Dat's right!" Vinegar Atts howled. "Marse Tom Gaitskill sent word by me dat you two niggers is in quaremtime fer six months. Ef you or

Limit comes to town, he'll hab you put in de jail-house."

"Limit kin wear a blind bridle till you git yo' nachel-bawn color back, Ticky," Skeeter snickered. "Good-by!"

The four stretcher bearers left the bride and groom and walked up the hill to where their mules were standing.

When Skeeter picked up his driving lines he broke into a loud cackle of laughter.

"Say, fellers," he snickered. "Ain't dat Tick Hush a funny nigger man? Ef you wus to set him in one of dese here revolvin' chairs, he wouldn't hab sense enough to turn aroun'."

A Corner in Pickaninnies

A MOCKING-BIRD sang his delirious music unnoticed above the head of Skeeter Butts as he sat beneath a chinaberry tree trying to recover from the shock of the latest negro sensation in Tickfall—the separation of Shin Bone and his wife.

"Dey shore got through wid demselves powerful soon," he muttered to himself as he lighted a fresh cigarette upon the stub of the old one. "Dey ain't been married but 'bout three years, an' deir baby tuck de prize at de baby show."

He propped his chair back against the trunk of the tree, tipped his derby hat down upon the bridge of his nose, put his shoe-heels inside the front rungs of the chair, and puffed his smoke in deep meditation.

"Wonder how come dey busted up?" he mused aloud in a low tone. "I reckin it's one of dese here do-mes-tic in-feli-city cases. *Hush!* Look at who's drawin' nigh!"

The front legs of Skeeter's chair came down upon the sand with a thump, he straightened his derby upon his closely shaved head, adjusted his high collar, and his noisy cravat, and waited.

Whiffle Bone came around the rear of the saloon, leading her two-year-old boy by the hand. Skeeter

sprang up, gave her a chair, and seated himself. The baby dropped upon the ground and began the construction of a sand house.

Not a word was spoken until both were comfortably seated, then Shin Bone's wife began:

"Me an' Shin is picked a fuss wid each yuther an' quit."

"Yes'm," Skeeter answered sympathetically.

The woman sat twisting her nervous hands, biting her lips, and turning at intervals to look behind her as if she expected some one to follow her. Finally she leaned over, rested her elbows upon her lap and her head upon her hands and began to cry, wailing like a calliope.

"Lawdymussy!" Skeeter gasped sucking the stub of his lighted cigarette into his mouth in his surprise. He sprang up, gagged, clawed at his lips, dancing first on one foot, then on the other.

"Aw, hush!" Skeeter howled at last, when he had rescued himself from the fire. "Shut up! Ef you wanter bust up wid Shin Bone, bust—but don't beller! Ef you wanter cornfess up to me about yo' troubles, bawl out—but don't beller! Ef you wanter pull my leg fer a few loose change to git back to yo' home folks, go ahead an' pull—but fer *Gawd's* sake, don't beller! Dis ain't de right season of de year fer a long wet spell like you done started—it'll spile de craps!"

Any married man could have told Skeeter that the best way to turn a light summer shower into a cloudburst of rainfall was to admonish a woman not to cry. As it was, Skeeter learned this fact on this occasion

by hard experience. The louder Skeeter bawled, the louder Whiffle Bone "bellered," and finally Skeeter sat down in despair and began to fiddle with a brass wrist-watch which he wore.

Gradually Whiffle's wails died down to an occasional blobbering gurgle, like water pouring out of the choked neck of a bottle. When she straightened up and began to mop the tears from her cheeks with the corner of her apron, Skeeter inquired:

"Whut made you an' Shin explode yo' fambly life?"

"Money!" Whiffle answered shortly. "I done all de cookin' an' de waitin' on at our eatin'-house. Shin, he done light haulin' wid de hoss an' wagin, cut all de wood, an' hauled it outen de swamp, an' cleant up de eatin'-house befo' breakfust in de mawnin'."

"You-all 'vided up yo' wuck pretty even," Skeeter remarked.

"Yes, suh. But Shin, he argufy dat de money oughter be 'vided up even, too; me, I argufy dat I oughter keep all de money an' gib Shin jes' as much as I figgered he oughter hab."

"Cain't you-all compermise yo' 'spute no way?" Skeeter inquired.

"De only way fer Shin to compermise wid me is to comp' on my own terms," Whiffle wailed. "Ain't dat so?"

"Yes'm," Skeeter agreed readily. "Sometimes a nigger man kin compermise wid a woman an' git her to take his own terms; but fust of all, he's got to bounce 'bout seven rocks offen her head."

This remark started Whiffle again, and the sobs

began to pop from her throat like the exhaust of a gasoline engine.

"Aw, shuckins!" Skeeter grumbled. "Now I done gone an' punched a hole in de water-barrel agin. Shut up, Whiffle! You's too durn moistuous to suit me—ef I 'a' knowed you wus comin' here to wet me wid all yo' fambly troubles, I'd borrered a rubber divin'-suit!" In his exasperation, Skeeter hurled his cigarette-stub to the ground, and sat glaring around him, wondering what to do.

Whiffle's baby picked up the cigarette-stub, put the lighted end into his mouth, and emitted a yelp which raised Skeeter out of his chair, and which trailed off into a series of shuddering wails like the call of a screech-owl.

"My good gosh!" Skeeter howled, glaring indignantly at the youngster and his mother. "De ole she-bear an' de cub *bofe* at it now! Whut you wanter wish all dis Gulf of Mex'co full of tears onto me fer? I's gwine build me a Noer's ark!"

Whiffle promptly forgot her tears in an effort to assuage the grief of her son.

"Po' little pickaninny—mammy's little darlin'!" she crooned, as she lifted him upon her lap. "You want mammy to sing you a song? Listen, honey, shet yo' eyes an' shet yo' mouf, an' cock yo' ears an' listen!"

The tears were glistening upon her wet cheeks, as she drew the little boy close to her and crooned:

"De black pot's bigger dan a fryin' pan,
An' upon dis groun' I takes my stan'—
I'd druther be a nigger dan a po' white man!"

"Huh!" Skeeter Butts murmured to himself as he watched the woman and her child. "I wonder do she really love dat kid, or is she huggin' him jes' to spite Shin Bone? I never knowed who my mammy or daddy wus, an' I don't got no way to find out."

As the woman sang, she looked off across the spaces, focusing her tear-wet eyes upon the purple haze which hung above the Little Moccasin Swamp. In a moment, the whimpering of the baby ceased, and his tired head rested in sleep upon his young mother's ample bosom. After a while Whiffle reverted to her trouble with her husband.

"I been keepin' all de money sence we wus married, Skeeter, so when me an' Shin quit I jes' tied up de loose change in a stockin'-toe an' fotch it away wid me. Dat leaves Shin de eatin'-house an' de hoss an' wagin."

"I figger dat wus fair," Skeeter replied in an earnest desire to be propitiatory and prevent any more tears.

"Whut I come to see you 'bout is dis, Skeeter: who do dis little pickaninny b'long to?" and as she spoke, Whiffle hugged the little boy closer to her and gazed down fondly on his tear-marked face.

Skeeter saw here another opportunity to break up the fountains of the great deep and start a flood of tears, so he sought for a diplomatic answer in hope of preventing a crevasse.

"Shin is his daddy, you is his mammy—he b'longs to you bofe," Skeeter replied.

"I figger dat he is my chile," Mrs. Bone said, beginning to sniffle.

"Yes'm," Skeeter answered hastily. "I thinks so, too!"

"Shin figgers dat little Shinny is his chile," Mrs. Bone remarked, sniffling some more.

"Yes'm," Skeeter grunted. "Yes'm! Dat's so!"

"I's got de chile now, but Shin say he's gwine take him away from me," Mrs. Bone declared, and now the shower of tears began with a rush. "Whut muss I do?"

"You mought stop dis weepin'-willer, deep-mournin' stunt till I kin git my brains to thinkin'," Skeeter suggested. "You gib me de muddlegrubs cuttin' up like dis! Why don't you take de chile an' run off somewheres?"

"'Twon't do no good," Whiffle sobbed. "Shin would foller atter me an' take little Shinny away!"

"You mought let Shin keep him half de time, an' you keep him half de time," Skeeter proposed.

"Ef Shin ever gits holt of dis boy, he'll keep him all de time," Whiffle wailed.

"Aw, mud!" Skeeter vociferated, staring at the weeping woman. "I never seed sech a puddle as you make out of yo'se'f. Dry up!"

The conversation ceased for about ten minutes, but the silence was constantly shattered by the cork-popping sobs of Whiffle.

"Skeeter," she pleaded finally, "would you wish to he'p me keep my little boy all fer myse'f? I kin take better keer of him dan Shin."

"Yes'm, I's willin' to he'p," Skeeter said uncertainly. "You see, I ain't never been married an' I don't know nothin' 'bout chillun or deir mammies.

I don't know jes' perzackly whut I kin do. It might be dangersome fer a igernunt nigger like me to butt into mattermony matters."

"'Tain't no danger," Whiffle replied quickly. "Shin is gwine try to steal dis chile from me ternight, an' I wants you to he'p me guard him."

Skeeter lighted a cigarette and sat puffing at it for a long time. Then his eyes began to sparkle, and he said with a chuckle:

"I'll take you up on dat, Whiffle."

"Whut is you gwine do?" Whiffle asked, her face shining with relief.

"I dopes it out like dis," Skeeter answered. "A new nigger woman is visitin' in dis town, an' me an her begun to shine up to each yuther real prompt. She's got a little boy jes' de size an' age an' color of dis here brat of your'n."

"Dat don't he'p me none," Whiffle mourned.

"When I talks—you listen!" Skeeter snapped. "Don't try to bake no biscuits till I git done mixin' de dough! All I wants you to do is to git de repote to Shin Bone private an' confidential dat you is gwine out of town fer a little rest an' dat I will keep yo' baby till you gits back. Atter dat, jes' take yo' brat an' go!"

"But ef I takes him wid me, you won't hab him," Whiffle whined.

"Oh, my big toe!" Skeeter snarled. "I don't blame Shin Bone fer gittin' a deevo'ce—you ain't got no sense! Whut I means is dis: I'll borrer my lady frien's little boy to-night. Shin will git de repote dat I am keepin' little Shinny. Of co'se, Shin will come

to de Hen-Scratch an' swipe de chile I'm got an' run away. When daylight comes, he'll discover dat he's got some yuther nigger's boy!"

"I sees," Whiffle whimpered. "But ef Shin come an' swipes de wrong baby, whut will yo' lady frien' say to you?"

"Nothin'," Skeeter replied. "She won't hab no kick-back. Of co'se, when Shin finds out dat he's got de wrong pup by de year, he'll jes' nachelly fotch him back to his real maw. Nobody don't want somebody else's yearlin'."

"Dat's right," Whiffle muttered. "I'd hate to loant my honey boy fer dat puppus, but mebbe yo' lady frien' is diff'unt. I'll succulate de repote of me leavin' so Shin kin git it."

"Good-by!" Skeeter grinned.

A few minutes after Whiffle had gone, Skeeter Butts left his business in charge of his assistant and started toward the home of Mustard Prophet, where his new friend was visiting. He found her sitting on the porch, entertaining her little boy.

"Howdy, Happy!" he greeted her. "How 's you an' de little boy to-day?"

"Us is feelin' fine," Happy smiled. "How come you is runnin' aroun' when you oughter be keepin' bar?"

"I come to cornverse you 'bout a little bizzness," Skeeter answered promptly.

"Come up an' set down!" the young woman invited, pushing aside and making a place for him on the bench she occupied. "Rest yo' hat, put yo' foots

on de porch rail, light a cigar, wind yo' watch—jes' make yo'se'f at home."

"Yes'm," Skeeter grinned, as he seated himself beside her. "Yo' name is shore a good sign of yo' disposition—bofe is happy. But, Happy, ef yo' name gimme de lock-jaw eve'y time I pernounced it, it would still taste awful good to me!"

"You muss hab kissed de coal-oil can befo' you lef' de Hen-Scratch, Skeeter," Happy responded. "Yo' nigger tongue is mighty slick!"

Skeeter ignored the remark and looked the woman over with appraising eyes. She was tall, slim, graceful, dark-skinned, bright-eyed, with an easy-smiling, good-natured mouth. Her home was in Baton Rouge, her dress and manner bespoke the city, and Skeeter's susceptible heart was deeply affected.

"Dat's a beautiful chile," Skeeter remarked fondly, as he gazed at the little boy who sat on the floor trying to see how close he could poke his finger toward the business end of a wasp without getting stung.

"Yes, suh, I's shore proud of my baby," the woman smiled.

"Would you loant him to me fer a little while tonight, Happy?" Skeeter asked.

"Whut you wanter do wid him?"

"He's such a diff'unt-lookin' kid to all dese here dirty pickaninnies in dis town dat I figgered it would be a good edgercation fer dese here home niggers to see him," Skeeter recited glibly. "Me an' Sheriff Flournoy follers up de Nigger Uplift Movement, an' I don't know nothin' dat'll put good notions in a

nigger's head like gittin' a look at dis nice, clean, dressy nigger boy."

"Ain't it de trufe!" Happy exclaimed proudly.

"Yes'm," Skeeter continued. "I figger dat I could take yo' little boy to de Hen-Scratch to-night, show him off, brag on him, an' make dese home niggers ashamed of deir offsprings—ain't dat so?"

"Shore is!" Happy replied. "I wisht I could be dar an' hear you brag yo' brags on him."

"'Tain't possible," Skeeter exclaimed quickly. "Womans ain't be allowed in de Scratch. But ef yo' little boy makes a hit, I might could git de Revun Vinegar Atts to gib a baby show at de Shoofly chu'ch, an' I'm shore yo' little boy would tote off de prize."

"You kin hab him, Skeeter!" the woman exclaimed exultantly. "You come fer him to-night atter supper. I'll hab him all dressed up like a circus bandwagon. Only I gibs you dis advice right now: don't grab my chile by de lef' arm onless you wants him to sot up a howl. Dat arm is powerful sore!"

"I'll lead him by de han' like a gen'leman," Skeeter grinned. "Whut is de name he's called by?"

"I calls him Ready Rocket—atter his deceasted paw," Happy told him.

"I'll come by fer him atter dark, Mrs. Rocket," Skeeter declared, as he reached for his hat. "Git him ready."

As Skeeter walked down the street a new idea came to him.

"Dat woman is gwine dress up dat kid like a Mardi

Gras, an' Shin won't swipe him—Shin'll know dat ain't his'n. I wonder is Whiffle lef' town yit?"

Skeeter hastened to Pap Curtain's cabin and found that Whiffle had not.

"Whiffle," he said, "I come mighty nigh fergittin' a mos' important bizzness. I want some of little Shinny's ole ragged clothes. Ef Shin comes to steal dat yuther brat to-night, we got to fix him up so Shin won't find out de cub ain't his'n."

"I got plenty ragged clothes," Whiffle replied. "I'll git you a full suit."

"When is you leavin' out fer de hog-camp, Whiffle?" Skeeter asked as soon as the suit was wrapped in a bundle.

"I's gittin' ready to walk right now," Whiffle told him.

"Dat's a good idear to walk it," Skeeter remarked. "You kin take shawt cut-offs through de woods, an' ef anybody is passin' you kin hide in de grass so dey cain't see you is got little Shinny wid you."

"It's a powerful long walk," Whiffle complained. "But I guess I'm got to take it."

"You kin come back in de mawnin'," Skeeter assured her, as he rose to go. "When Shin finds out he's made a miscue an' stole de wrong chile, de Tick-fall niggers will buzz him till he leaves town fer good."

It was sundown when Skeeter got back to the saloon, and he ate his supper and waited impatiently until the darkness was heavy enough for him to venture after Happy's son. At last he slipped to her cabin, lifted the laughing little fellow upon his shoul-

ders, and carried him back to the rear room of his saloon.

"Huh," Skeeter grunted as he turned on the light and surveyed the boy. "Happy shore has put de paradise rags on Ready Rocket. He looks like a valumtime. I don't b'lieve he'll feel half as comf'able in dem gyarmints as he will in dese sensible clothes."

Then for the first time in his life Skeeter began to undress a baby. His inexperienced hands were as clumsy as if he wore boxing-gloves; he felt around the garments for buttons and stuck pins in himself; he unhitched parts of the little fellow's harness and found to his surprise that they were connected with other parts of his clothes which apparently had no way of being detached. The sweat popped out on Skeeter's face, his fingers trembled, and his lips were drawn in a straight, nervous line.

"Gosh!" he sighed. "Dis is de hardest wuck I ever done, an' I ain't done it yit. Dis job ain't even good started. It would take about fo'teen womans to undress dis valumtime doll. I bet his maw melted him in a cookin' pot an' poured him into dese clothes."

He struggled on, jerking and pulling, but accomplishing little. Then he straightened up and surveyed his task.

"Ef I could button dem clothes on de way dey wus at fust, I'd put little Shinny's rags on over 'em," he announced to himself. Then he shook his head hopelessly. "'Tain't no use tryin' dat. I gotter study dis problem out an' git dem bliss rags off!" He turned the boy around to take a comprehensive sur-

vey of the mystery. Then he found a button in the rear and undid it. The clothes fell off of little Ready Rocket like the last leaf off of a tree, leaving the limbs bare.

"Dar now!" Skeeter snickered. "Ain't dat funny! Dis here is a one-button suit. You press de button an' lo an' beholes!"

He looked the tiny black-skinned chunk of humanity over. On Ready's left arm he found an ugly scar.

"Looks like a fresh vaccinate mark to me," he muttered. "I mighty nigh fergot whut Happy tole me 'bout dat sore arm."

He brought a bright red stick of candy out of his pocket and placed it in Ready Rocket's willing hand.

"Now, sonny," he whispered. "You suck dat sugar-stick an' fergit dat I is changin' yo' clothes. I cain't handle dese city duds, but I knows how to put on little Shinny's overalls an' shirt beca'se I wore dem kind of drapery my own se'f."

The little fellow murmured no complaint at the operation except when Skeeter momentarily separated his hand from his mouth and deprived him of his sugar-stick. But Skeeter quickly made the proper connection again, and when the child was dressed in little Shinny's old clothes, Skeeter tossed the glad rags into a dark corner, lifted Ready in his arms, and carried him out on the street.

"Now, sonny," he said, as he placed Ready on the ground, "us 'll take a long, long walk!"

He started straight down the middle of the sandy road, the little boy trotting beside him sucking his

candy. A quarter of a mile had been covered in this way when Ready Rocket dropped his candy.

"Ah-hah!" Skeeter said, as he picked up the sticky candy, wiped a little of the sand and dust off it, and stuck it back in Ready's gaping mouth. "Dat's a good sign—you is gittin' tired an' sleepy."

They turned around and started back toward the saloon, Skeeter pressing the boy to walk as fast as he could. Half a dozen times in the return walk the little fellow dropped his candy and finally Skeeter grew tired of Ready's carelessness. He merely picked up the sticky substance and helped Ready make connection with his mouth and hand, without taking the trouble to wipe off the dirt.

"Ef you git de colic eatin' dat gorm of sugar an' dirt, I hopes Shin Bone will hab you to wait on," Skeeter remarked to his charge. "I ain't got no expe'unce wid some yuther nigger's stomick-ache."

Within two blocks of the barroom, Ready's little feet stopped like a clock with a broken spring. Skeeter dragged him for a few steps by the arm. Then he lifted the sleeping child, carried him to a ragged quilt in a corner of the rear room, and laid him down. The child's tiny hand still clutched the muddy sugar-stick.

Skeeter entered the saloon and took his place behind the bar to wait for Shin Bone. He did not have long to wait, and when Shin Bone appeared Skeeter gasped, and his hand slipped to the little shelf under the bar where his automatic pistol rested.

Shin had been drinking heavily, but the liquor had not made him noisy. He was extremely quiet. He

walked restlessly about the barroom with the prowling movements of a cat, careful not to make a noise with his feet as he staggered across the floor, answering if spoken to in a whisper, and glancing nervously around him all the time. The practised eyes of the negroes recognized the signs of danger. They knew Shin was out to kill. Some slipped away, and all the others became perfectly quiet. They knew that a loud laugh, the noise of an overturned chair, the breaking of a glass, the clatter of a stick falling to the floor, any of these things might start the drink-crazed negro to shooting. Shin had not only never been drunk before, but no one had ever seen him drinking. But now no jungle beast was more dangerous.

Finally Shin walked straight up to Skeeter and leaned against the bar.

"Skeeter, is you got my little boy?" he inquired in a low tone with exaggerated courtesy.

"Dar's a little pickaninny sleepin' on a quilt in de back room, Shin," Skeeter answered uneasily.

"I wants him," Shin remarked.

"He ain't no kinnery of mine, Shin," the barkeeper retorted. "Ever who owns him kin hab him."

"Dis here sinful saloom ain't no fitten place fer my angel chile," Shin remarked in the same low, deadly tone.

"His maw axed me to keep him, Shin," Skeeter said. "Of co'se, a daddy is got de fust right to his own baby an' I's jes' tryin' to be friends on bofe sides."

"You ain't no friend of mine," Shin told him flatly. "I ain't huntin' no friends. I's huntin' revengeance!"

Shin walked away, muttering to himself.

Skeeter listened and heard Shin stumble across the floor in the rear room. With a loud grunt he stooped over the soiled quilt where Ready Rocket lay. With a louder grunt, he lifted the boy in his arms, and Skeeter heard him stagger to the door and close it quietly behind him.

A few minutes later Skeeter heard a loud wail down the street, and broke into a broad grin.

"I reckin Shin is done fell on Ready Rocket an' squshed him; mebbe he's done squoze Ready's sore arm; mebbe Ready's got de colics—I hopes so. I hopes all dem things is come to pass."

About two hours after Shin Bone had taken his departure with little Ready Rocket, Mustard Prophet entered, looked around the barroom for a moment, then came over to Skeeter Butts, and inquired:

"Whar is Ready Rocket?"

"Gawd knows," Skeeter replied. "He has went."

"Happy Rocket sont me to fetch him home," Mustard said. "She say it's little Ready's bedtime an' he'll git sleepy."

"My stars an' garters!" Skeeter exclaimed. "She don't look fer dat brat home to-night, do she?"

"Suttinly. Whar is he at?"

Skeeter began to pant. He mopped the sweat from his forehead and looked around him desperately. His eyes lighted upon Pap Curtain.

"Come over dis way, Pap," he called.

When Pap and Mustard stood side by side, Skeeter leaned over the bar and said earnestly:

"Pap, I want you an' Mustard to keep bar fer me till I git back."

"Dat suits us!" the two darkies chanted.

"I'll tend to little Ready Rocket, Mustard," Skeeter said as he reached for his derby hat.

As he passed out the two negroes looked at each other and grinned.

"Skeeter's done kotch de mattermony germ agin," Pap chuckled. "Tryin' to hitch up wid Happy Rocket an' her whelp. Lawd! Think of Skeeter marryin' a widder an' a ready-made fambly!"

Skeeter made a bee-line for Mustard Prophet's cabin where Mrs. Happy Rocket could be found. But he had no matrimonial intentions.

"I jes' drapped over to tell you 'bout little Ready Rocket, Happy," Skeeter began as soon as he was seated. "Ready won't be home to-night."

"Won't—*which?*" Happy's voice was almost a scream.

"Ready's gwine lay out to-night," Skeeter remarked easily, lighting a cigarette.

"How come?" Happy wailed, and her voice had a note of hysteria.

"It happened dis way," Skeeter replied. "Ready got a little sleepy an' I spread him down a pallet on de flo' in de rear room. A drunk bum named Shin Bone foun' little Ready an' thought it wus his own chile, so he picked him up an' toted him off!"

Skeeter didn't see any actuating cause for what followed this statement and the astounding result gave him the supreme sensation of his life.

Mrs. Happy Rocket sprang to her feet, spun round

and round like a whirling dervish, tore at her hair, then wrapped her long arms around her head and screamed like a maniac!

"My Lawd!" Skeeter exclaimed. "Stop dat yelpin'—you's fetchin' dat bawl too high! A police will come an' git you toreckly!"

"O my chile! my chile! my baby chile!" Happy screamed, wringing her hands, walking up and down the porch floor, and stopping her walk now and then to spin around like a top. "Lawd hab mussy! My onliest baby chile!"

"Aw, hush!" Skeeter pleaded, absolutely blind to the distress of the woman. "You done mourned a plenty 'bout dat little weanlin'. He ain't nothin' but a two-year-ole!"

"Stole by a drunk man!" Happy whooped. "Toted away! O my po' little baby boy—he'll be kilt!"

"Naw!" Skeeter protested. "Shin won't do nothin' like dat. Shin thinks dat is his boy. He'll fotch little Ready back as quick as he gits sober."

"Oh! Oh! Oh!" Happy screamed, as she turned from Skeeter and staggered into the house. "Oh!"

The agony in the mother's voice caused Skeeter's hair to stand on end. Inside the room Happy fell flat upon the floor unconscious.

"Gawd he'p us!" Skeeter screamed. "She's done throwed a fit!"

He called loudly for Hopey, Mustard Prophet's wife, then instantly remembered that she had not yet come from the Gaitskill home where she was cook. He started out of the door in a run to seek for help

and met Hopey at the gate. She had heard the screams and had come in a panic.

Hopey was fat and spread out like a dumpling soaked in gravy, and was sweating like an ice pitcher from her excitement and exertion.

"Whut's de matter, Skeeter Butts?" she howled. "All dis flurry gibs me a toothache in my stomick."

"Happy ain't happy no more," Skeeter lamented. "She's hacked!"

"Whut made her dis way?" Hopey panted, as she bent over the young mother's prostrate form.

"She got peeved up beca'se I borrered little Ready Rocket an' couldn't fotch him back," Skeeter explained.

"Go git him!" Hopey whooped. "Hurry befo' dis nigger woman dies!"

"Huh," Skeeter grunted. "You ack like a little nigger cub is wuth a millyum dollars!"

"Go git him!" Hopey howled.

"I don't know whar he am!" Skeeter retorted. "Shin Bone swiped him!"

"You nachel-bawn, ignernunt *fool!*" Hopey screamed. "Shin ain't run off nowheres! I passed de restaurant jes' now an' he wus settin' in dar by hisse'f singin' religium toons! Go git Ready!"

Skeeter shot out of the door and ran across the yard, but before he reached the street, Hopey bawled atter him:

"When dis nigger woman comes outen her fit, I's gwine tell her all about dat plan you fixed up to make Shin steal her darlin' chile—an' she'll pull yo' hind leg off an' beat yo' brains out wid it!"

At the nearest corner Skeeter came to a quick stop.

"Ef Shin Bone is settin' in his eatin' house drunk an' singin' religium toons, it's a shore sign he'd shoot me in a minute ef I tried to git dat Ready Rocket."

He snatched off his hat, clawed at his thinly cropped hair, and sighed like the exhaust of a steamboat.

"Ain't I in a awful mess?" he panted. "I done twisted an' turned myse'f till I's too crooked to walk through a tunnel—when I die dey'll hab to bury me in a round hat box!"

He dropped down upon an old stump, and his nervous feet beat a tattoo upon the sandy soil.

"I never knowed womans wus so crazy about deir chillun befo'," he exclaimed. "*My* mammy done los' me out in de woods an' Marse John Flournoy foun' me in de swamp when I wus 'bout two year ole. He tole me I wus plum' naked, jes' crawlin' aroun' in de high marsh grass like a little lan' tarrapin. Dat don't look like nigger mammies loved deir brats. But den, dey done foun' my mammy daid in anodder part of de swamp. But dese here moderm niggers—lawd, dey shore cherish spite!"

Suddenly a new thought galvanized him into action.

"Dat's de idear!" he proclaimed, springing to the middle of the street and running at full speed. "I'll ride out to de hog-camp in de Little Moccasin Swamp an' make Whiffle Bone let me fotch back little Shinny to his real paw. Den I'll get Shin Bone to swap brats wid me, an' dat'll make us even an' end all dese troubles."

He ran through the crooked lanes of Dirty-Six like

a brown shadow, passed with unchecked speed through the portion of Tickfall occupied by the whites, and began to pant up the long hill on the summit of which stood the house of Sheriff John Flournoy.

Skeeter was perfectly at home here, for he lived in a cabin in the rear of Flournoy's house, and had done just as he pleased about the place ever since Flournoy had found him in the swamp, a little naked baby crawling through the high marsh grass, mewing like a little blind kitten. He hurried around the house to the garage and opened the doors as noiselessly as he could. He had determined to use a little runabout which Flournoy kept for his fishing and hunting trips. In this machine he could go to the hog-camp, get Whiffle Bone's baby, and return in a very short time.

He pushed the little runabout out of the garage, pushed it down the hill in the rear of the house, cranked it, sprang into the seat, and drove through a back pasture, out of a gate, and onto the rear street. He took one fearful look behind him and saw with gratification that no light had flashed up in Flournoy's house to show that the occupants had been disturbed by his intrusion upon the property.

Skeeter shot through the white portion of the town, and turned into the lanes of Dirty-Six at a perilous speed. His dilapidated machine was rattling and squeaking a loud protest at every turn, but Skeeter did not heed the warning.

Then as Skeeter passed Pap Curtain's house, a tire burst with a loud explosion, the runabout careened perilously, and before Skeeter could stop, it leaped from the road, crashed through Pap Curtain's fence,

and came to a halt within a few steps of Pap's porch.

In the silence which followed, Skeeter heard a woman in Pap's cabin whooping like a siren in a fog.

"Aw, shut up!" Skeeter snapped. "You ain't in no danger. *I's* de coon whut oughter be howlin'."

He leaped out of the machine, snatched open the tool box, wrenched off an extra tire from the rear of the car and began to make repairs.

The door opened and Whiffle Bone stepped out upon the porch!

"Bless gracious, Whiffle!" Skeeter exclaimed in a glad voice, as he worked with furious haste adjusting his new tire. "I thought you wus out at de hog-camp. Whar is little Shinny Bone?"

This question started another series of howls, and Skeeter had his tire fitted and was ready to crank his car before Whiffle had calmed down to where she could answer.

"Little Shinny has went!" Whiffle screamed. "I decided not to go to de hog-camp beca'se it wus so fur. I tried to keep little Shinny hid in dis cabin. But Hopey Prophet an' a nigger woman named Happy comed here jes' now, an' Happy blacked my eye an' punched my face an' hurt my feelin's at some yuther places an' took little Shinny Bone away. Dey said dey wus gwine keep him fer security till you fotch back Ready Rocket! I woulder follered 'em, but I wus skeart dey would kill me!"

"Dat's good news, Whiffle!" Skeeter exclaimed as he cranked his car, and sprang into the seat. "Keep ca'm, an' plug up de calliope! I'll go git Ready

Rocket an' fetch little Shinny back in less'n a minute!"

"I'll git little Shinny fust," Skeeter decided as he shot down the street. He stopped his automobile a block away from Mustard Prophet's house, ran down the street, and slipped into a little side yard by climbing the fence.

Hopey and Happy were in the kitchen, and Skeeter heard Hopey's loud voice:

"'Tain't no good fer you to howl, Happy. Skeeter will fotch back yo' little boy as quick as he kin git him, an' we done got dat yuther woman's brat fer s'curity."

"'Tain't nothin' like habin' yo' own chile!" Happy wailed.

"Hey!" Hopey bellowed. "Sup up dis hot tea now an' stop blubberin'!"

Skeeter had heard enough to know that the women did not have the child in the kitchen with them. He stepped around the house, tiptoed up to the porch, and lo! the boy lay asleep upon the bed just inside of the open door.

"Dat gits me straight in dis bizzness," Skeeter grinned, as he slipped into the room and lifted the sleeping child. "I'm shorely got de Lawd wid me dis time. Nobody cain't git dis pickaninny away from me widout plenty compelment!"

He deposited Shinny in the machine, spun down the street to the Bone eating-house, and once more stopped his car a block away.

"Shin's got killin' on de brain," he muttered.

"I's gwine spy aroun' a little befo' I crowds him too close."

Shin Bone was seated alone in the middle of his restaurant which was lighted up like a circus. He was lining out a church hymn, singing it at the top of his voice, and beating the time with a large tin coffee pot. He had pounded the table with his tin pot until it was a certainty that it would never serve its original purpose again.

"I guess little Ready is sleepin' in de back room," Skeeter remarked, as he slipped around to the rear.

He entered the open door and found the child lying upon the bed which was usually occupied by Shin Bone's real son. Carefully lifting the little fellow, Skeeter walked quickly down the street, grinning exultantly as he listened to Shin Bone's raucous voice singing:

"O heaben's mighty nigh,
Mighty nigh, mighty nigh,
Ef you got a eye fer visions
In de sky, in de sky!"

When young Ready lay beside Shin Bone's boy in the automobile, Skeeter felt almost happy.

"It 'pears to me like I got dis job by de tail wid a downhill pull!" he exulted, as he started his machine and drove away from Dirty-Six with a lighter heart.

"I'se gwine take dese babies to my cabin," he decided. "Dem squallin' womans kin wait fer deir brats—dey don't 'preciate whut I done fer 'em nohow. But Marse John might git peeved up ef he

missed dis automobile an' I cain't affode to git in no lawsuit wid de cotehouse."

Entering Sheriff John Flournoy's yard, Skeeter Butts drove his little rattling runabout up the asphalt runway toward the garage in as nearly perfect silence as he could command.

Quickly he dismounted and pushed the little machine back where it belonged. Then he lifted the sleeping children out of the machine and started toward his own cabin.

Instantly a long shaft of white light shot across his path and he scampered out of the way, hiding behind some shrubbery which grew close to the house. He looked down the runway and his hair stood on end.

Flournoy's big automobile was coming up the drive, its powerful light turning from side to side, illuminating every inch of the way. Skeeter did not know what moment a turn of the wheel would cause the light to flash across his body, so he slippped along the side of the house out to the front.

Alas! Standing at the front gate where she had just left the car was Mrs. Flournoy, and the electric light upon the corner made the front lawn as bright as day.

Skeeter noted that Mrs. Flournoy's back was turned to him, so he scampered up the front steps and entered the front door just as Mrs. Flournoy turned to come up the walk.

Flournoy never thought of locking his house for the reason that half a dozen bloodhounds were running at large on his lawn all the time. For a moment,

because of this fact, Skeeter had escaped observation. What to do next was his problem.

The house was perfectly familiar to Skeeter. He could have gone all over it with his eyes shut. And he was perfectly welcome there night and day, for he had been coming and going in that house for twenty-five years with no one to question his actions. But he had no desire to be caught in that house with two strange babies in his arms!

The front door opened and Mrs. Flournoy entered, snapping on the electric light in the reception-room. Skeeter retreated to the dining-rooms still hugging the two children in his wearying arms.

"Huh," he muttered to himself. "Dese folks always gits somepin to eat befo' dey goes to bed. I better git outen dis dinin'-room!"

He was just in time, too, for the doors to the dining-room slid open just as Skeeter stepped into a little back hall, which contained a narrow staircase leading to the second story. Skeeter tiptoed up the steps. His idea was to wait until the folks had entered the dining-room, then go down the front stairs, out of the front door and around to his cabin.

But luck was against him!

At the top of the steps he paused to rest his arms and get another grip upon the children he was carrying. He laid the boys side by side, took one under each arm like a bundle, and started on. Then it happened. He attempted to enter a narrow door and a little woolly nigger head hit the sharp edge of the door jamb on each side with a thump!

The two pickaninnies let out a howl which turned Skeeter's blood to ice water.

Any effort toward concealment was useless now, and Skeeter was consumed with desire to get out of that house. He galloped down the front steps, turned into the rear hall, and stepped out upon a side porch.

Sheriff John Flournoy met him at the steps!

Flournoy turned the electric flashlight he had been using at the garage into Skeeter's face, and the blinded, terrified darky reeled backward and dropped the two howling nigger babies upon the porch floor.

"Turn on the light, Skeeter!" Flournoy commanded.

Skeeter reached up above his head and switched on an electric light suspended from a cord.

Flournoy looked down at the howling nigger babies and grinned. He saw nothing unusual in the fact that Skeeter was coming out of his home at eleven o'clock at night, for Mrs. Flournoy had left Skeeter in charge of the house a thousand times in their absence. Nor did the two black babies excite anything more than amusement, for several negro families lived on his place and their cabins were full of children.

"Did you steal those nigger babies, Skeeter?" Flournoy drawled in his easy, smiling way. The remark was merely to make talk.

"Naw, suh," Skeeter stammered. "Naw, suh!"

"I'm glad to hear you say that," Flournoy chuckled. "Since the Lamana kidnaping case, the Legislature has passed a law making the penalty for stealing children very severe in Louisiana."

Skeeter attempted to moisten his parched lips with a dry tongue. Then he asked through jaws which felt like they were locked:

"Whut—whut—whut am de penalty, Marse John?"

"*Death!*" the sheriff answered.

Then an oath of surprise popped from his throat. Skeeter had crumpled like a broken weed and had fallen face downward between the two squalling black babies.

Flournoy leaped forward and turned the prostrate man over on his back.

The negro had fainted.

Mrs. Flournoy appeared upon the side porch and quieted the babies by the simple process of giving each of them a piece of fried chicken.

Sheriff Flournoy as quickly restored Skeeter to consciousness by pouring cold water on his head and hot liquor down his throat.

Then leaving the babies to play under the electric light upon the porch, they conducted Skeeter to the kitchen and demanded explanations.

Nobody can beat a negro making explanations.

Skeeter's statement was utterly untrue, but when we remember that the frightened darky considered that he had been guilty of the crime of kidnaping and was hopefully attempting to save himself from the penalty of death, all kind-hearted persons will forgive him. Most of us would stretch the blanket just a little if by doing so we could save our lives.

"It happened dis way, Marse John," Skeeter said

in a trembling voice. "I wus givin' dem two little black babies a little outin', an' I decided I would fotch 'em up here an' let 'em see whar I lived at. I's proud of dat little cabin whut you-all gib me, even ef I do say it myse'f. I ain't been feelin' so powerful well sence 'bout supper-time to-night—it muss had been somepin I et—an' passin' de house I got to feelin' powerful bad, an' I decided I would git me some medicine. I knowed you-all warn't at home, but de med'cine chist is right up-stairs whar it's been fer twenty year, so I wint up dar to git me some linimint to rub on my misery. When I heerd the auto come in, I comed down to ax Ole Miss whut to take, an' when I wus talkin' to you on de po'ch somepin jes' nachelly happened!"

This sounded perfectly plausible to Skeeter's two white friends who did not have the least hint of the mess he had mixed down in the negro settlement.

"You'd better go to bed, Skeeter," Flournoy said kindly. "I've seen niggers pull many different stunts in my life, but you are the only darky I ever saw all in a dead faint."

"I been feelin' kinder faint an' feeble fer a good while," Skeeter moaned.

"I'll give you some pills to take, Skeeter," Mrs. Flournoy said. "Go to your cabin, and if you are not better in the morning we'll have the doctor."

Skeeter turned to her pleadingly.

"Whut is I gwine do wid dem two nigger babies?" he asked. "I bet deir maws is bellerin' fer 'em right now like cows callin' fer deir calves."

"Do you feel strong enough to drive my little run-

about, Skeeter?" Flournoy asked. "You can take the babies home in that."

"Yes, suh," Skeeter exclaimed eagerly. "I's strong enough to run it an' de fresh air will do me good."

Flournoy pushed out the little machine, helped Skeeter arrange the children so they would not tumble out, cranked the car for the "sick" negro, and for the second time that night the sheriff's little runabout started for Dirty-Six.

In the meantime things had been happening in that negro settlement. The grapevine telephone carried the news that Shin Bone had stolen Happy Rocket's baby. A little later the message ran along the same mysterious channel that Happy Rocket had stolen Shin Bone's baby. Then the startling information came that some party or parties unknown had stolen Shin Bone's baby out of Happy Rocket's cabin.

This was enough to bring the entire population of Dirty-Six out of their cabins into the street. They streamed up and down the narrow lanes, jabbering, gesticulating, telling again and again of the fight between Whiffle Bone and Happy Rocket, of the divorce of Shin and Whiffle, of the drunken spree of Shin Bone.

The general idea prevailed that Shin Bone had possession of both babies, but no one cared to go and inquire while Shin was crazy drunk, singing "heavy religion" songs, and pounding the table with a tin coffee pot.

Then Whiffle Bone caused a sensation by leaving her uncle Pap Curtain's cabin and running down the

street toward the Bone eating-house squalling like a catamount. Dozens of negroes fell into her wake and followed at a safe distance.

As they approached the restaurant they all recognized with pleasure that Shin Bone was sobering up. The best indication of this improvement was the character of songs he was singing. He had abandoned the heavy religion tunes, his voice had lost some of its volume, and the music was gay and lightsome:

"De boss he squall to de nigger boys:
'Don't bother dat jug in de spring!'
De jug he gurgle out: 'Good, good, good!'
But me, I holler an' sing:
'O gimme dat gal,
De big, greasy gal—
Don't nobody bother dat sway-backed Sal,
Who wrops up her hair wid a string!'"

Whiffle Bone threw open the door of the eating-house, ran across the sanded floor, threw herself into Shin Bone's outstretched arms, and broke into his song with a loud wail:

"O Shin, I loves you wid all my heart! Less don't fuss no more—I'll 'vide up de money even! An' fer Gawd's sake, come an' he'p me find little Shinny, our darlin', angel chile!"

"Don't pester yo' mind 'bout our angel chile," Shin Bone vociferated, pounding the table with the battered coffee pot. "I fotch him home from de Hen-Scratch—he layin' in de back room in his own little bed!"

Placing his coffee pot under his arm, he led his

sobbing, hysterical wife into the back room and then stood gazing in pop-eyed, drunken amazement at the empty bed.

"Whar is he at? Oh, whar is he *at?*" Whiffle screamed.

"I—I thought I toted him home, Whiffle!" Shin Bone said in a hysterical tone. "I wonder did I drap him down a well—or somepin like dat?"

This suggestion threw Whiffle into a maniacal frenzy and administered such a shock to Shin Bone that it sobered him completely in a moment.

"Come on, squall-cat!" he bellowed. "Less go to de Hen-Scratch an' ax Skeeter Butts 'bout dis!"

When they arrived at the saloon they found a dense crowd of negroes within the place listening to the whoops and howls of Happy Rocket and Hopey Prophet, both of whom had also come to the saloon to interrogate Skeeter Butts.

When Shin and his wife entered they occupied the opposite end of the barroom, and then began an antiphonal chorus between the two bereaved parties which was better as a show to the bystanders than a zoo full of ring-tailed monkeys.

Finally all their wails became focalized into one hysterical appeal:

"Where, oh, where is Skeeter Butts gone at?"

When Skeeter spun around the corner and looked up the street at the crowd assembled around his place of business, he availed himself of benefits of that intolerable nuisance called the muffler cut-out, and drew up to his saloon and stopped his car, popping like a battle of rapid-fire guns.

A man-sized voice at the door bawled the information to the people in the saloon:

"Here comes Skeeter Butts in Sheriff John Flournoy's ought-to-be-a-mule!" A moment later he bawled another announcement: "Skeeter's got the two lost babies wid him!"

In a moment more Skeeter was pushing and shoving at the door, while his voice cackled like a hen:

"Git out de way an' lemme pass! Lemme git in wid dese here stole babies!"

They made a ring around him in the middle of the room as he placed the two grinning, bright-eyed children on the floor at his feet. Each baby was happily chewing a chicken bone. The two mothers rushed forward to embrace their children, but Skeeter's commanding voice cracked like a bull-whip:

"Stan' back, nigger womans! Don't tech dem brats till I gib de word!"

There was a moment of intense silence while Skeeter gathered his wits to speak. No one in that crowd will ever know how frightened the little barkeeper was, nor how desperate. He had determined to risk his life and liberty upon the magic name of John Flournoy, Sheriff of Tickfall parish.

If this name failed to save him, he saw nothing before him but the prison and the hangman's noose.

"I been talkin' to Sheriff John Flournoy," he began. "Me an' Marse John is kinnery—I'm his folks."

He paused and took out his handkerchief, mopping his face. He felt like every pore of his skin was a spouting fountain of perspiration and he was sweating ice water.

"I went up to Marse John's house an' tole him dat Shin Bone stole little Ready Rocket outen my saloon, an' Marse John mighty nigh bust out cryin'! I tole him dat Happy Rocket stole little Shinny Bone right outen his mammy's arms, an' Marse John jes' blubbered right out like a little baby!"

"I don't see nothin' so powerful bad!" Shin Bone interrupted.

"My Gawd, Shin!" Skeeter exclaimed with all the dramatic force of his nature. "Marse John says he ain't had to hang no nigger sence he's been a sheriff, but de law specifies dat *de penalty fer stealin' a baby is death!*"

If Skeeter hoped to make a sensation, he did!

Whiffle Bone threw her arms around her husband's neck and sobbed as if he were already dead.

Happy Rocket dropped upon her knees upon the barroom floor, raised her quivering hands in an attitude of prayer and sobbed:

"O mussiful Gawd! I's a mean, wuthless nigger an' I ain't prepared to die!"

"Looky here, Skeeter!" Shin Bone howled in a desperate, frightened voice. "Didn't you steal dem babies yo' own se'f? How come you is got 'em wid you ef you didn't steal 'em?"

"Naw, suh!" Skeeter Butts squealed. "I attached dem chillun in de name of de law an' de sheriff an' de Nunited States of Loozanny!"

Then Shin Bone broke down and howled:

"Gimme my baby! Me an' Whiffle is gwine leave dis town till atter de gram-jury meets!"

"Take him!" Skeeter exclaimed. "I don't want

him—I'd druther hab a yeller-jacket under my shirt. Jes' take yo' brat an' go!"

"Gimme my baby!" Happy screamed. "I'se gwine back home to-night on de fust train!"

"Honey, don't let nothin' detain you!" Skeeter admonished her. "I don't want yo' baby—I'd druther hab a cockle-bur in my sock. Jes' take yo' brat an' go!"

In a few minutes the barroom was empty, the crowd splitting into two parts, following either Happy Rocket or Shin Bone home, according to their sympathies.

In the middle of the floor Skeeter found a tin coffee pot. It was battered, broken, and useless, and one side was caved in until it resembled a big, toothless mouth grinning at him in sardonic glee. He bent over it, examined it from all sides, but did not touch it. The mishaps of the night had made him cowardly.

"Nigger luck is always bad luck," he whispered. "Dis here tin pot might be a bomb an' bust right in my face. I'll let Little Bit pick it up when he cleans up in de mawnin'. All dis night bad luck has kotch me befo an' behime—mostly behime."

Skeeter sat down to rest his mind and collect his impressions. He was not the jaunty, confident, debonair young man he had been a few hours before. He felt like something had gone out of him, fading like breath upon a razor, leaving him but a shell of his former self, never to recover what he had lost and be the same again.

Tears of weakness and nervous collapse came into

his eyes and rolled down his cheeks to the corners of his mouth. He wiped them away with the palm of his yellow hand and spoke again:

"One time when I wus little I axed Marse John Flournoy whar I come from. He tole me dat a buzzard laid me an' de debbil hatched me in de hot ashes. I don't misdoubt dem words, because I been ketchin' hell ever since!"

Idle Dreams

"I AIN'T no scholard an' I don't need no book," Skeeter Butts proclaimed as he sat under the shade of a chinaberry tree in the rear of the Hen-Scratch saloon.

"Mebbe so," the glib-talking man beside him said; "but dis here ain't no highbrow book. It tells all 'bout whut dreams means. Don't you never dream nothin'?"

"Shore!" Skeeter exclaimed, clawing at a high, white collar which threatened to saw his head off. "Las' night I dreamt dat I done died an' went to de bad place."

"Dar now!" his friend exclaimed, turning the pages of the book until he found the word "Hell." "You listen to dis." Then, with the utmost difficulty the darky read: "'To dream of seein' hell denotes dat de dreamer's life is a bad one, an' is an in-ti-ma-tion to him of re-for-ma-tion.'"

"My gosh!" Skeeter Butts exclaimed, his eyes nearly popping out of his head. "Dat shore hit me right in de center of myse'f. How do dat book know?"

"I dunno," the negro answered. "I s'pose it's inspired. Anyways, it don't never miss nothin'. Is you had any mo' dreams recent?"

"Suttinly," Skeeter said, with a frightened expression on his saddle-colored face. "Night befo' las' I dreamed dat I wus up in a balloom."

"Us 'll see whut dat means," his friend exclaimed, fumbling with the book. "Here it am: 'Balloom—To dream of it shows dat you will engage in many chimer-i-cal plans.'"

"Engage in—*which?*" Skeeter demanded in a startled tone.

"Chi-mer-i-cal," the negro repeated with difficulty. "Dat's de kind it specify—Gawd knows whut dat means."

"How many of dem dreams comes true?" Skeeter asked uneasily, gazing at the gaudy red cover of the book.

"All of 'em," his companion answered promptly. "A garntee goes wid de book. Try it on wid anodder dream."

Skeeter hesitated a moment, thinking heavily. Then he said:

"'Bout a week ago I dreamed 'bout rats."

"Huh!" the other darky grunted as he found the place in the book. "Here am de word: 'Rats—Se-cret en-e-mies.'"

"Looky here, nigger!" Skeeter Butts exclaimed in a frightened voice as he sprang to his feet, "dat shore is a dangersome book. Put all dem dreams togedder an' look whut sort of a prize-package I done drawed!"

"Dat package shore is got some lemons in it fer you, Skeeter," his friend assured him. "De fust dream says dat yo' life am bad an' you oughter git

reformed; de second dream specify dat you is gwine engage in—in—whut-you-call-it plans; de las' dream orate dat you got plenty enemies!"

"Dat's de way it goes," Skeeter mourned.

"Does you want a garntee dat all 'em dreams will come true?"

"Naw!" Skeeter howled. "I wants a garntee dat none of 'em gits to come to pass."

He snatched a package of cigarettes out of his pocket, lighted one with trembling fingers, burned it to his lips with furious puffs, and spat the stub out upon the ground. Then he exhaled an immense volume of smoke around his head, as if invoking protective incense from the depths of his lungs.

"How much do dat book cost?" Skeeter finally asked.

"One dollar," was the answer.

"Make it fo' bits an' I'll buy de book," Skeeter told him.

"I cain't do it, Skeeter," the other darky responded. "I needs a dollar. Excusin' dat, a nigger whut ain't willin' to pay one roun' dollar to learn how much bad luck is gwine git him deserves to hab a few mo' bad dreams."

"Dat's a fack," Skeeter sighed as he laid a silver dollar on his companion's knee and reached out his hand for the volume.

"I hates to part wid dis book, Skeeter," his friend said, as he reluctantly handed it over. "It shore is a wonder book. I been readin' atter it fer mighty nigh a year. One dream I had specify dat somebody wus gwine inherit me money!"

"I might could stan' dat kind of a dream," Skeeter said in a solemn tone of voice. "But I's gwine roost powerful low fer a little while till I kin change dem bad dreams I'm had to good ones."

"Dat's de rule," the other darky chuckled, as he pocketed the dollar and rose to leave. "Ef dat book says, 'Lay low,' you done got yo' ordahs. Ef it tells a rabbit to climb a tree, Br'e'r Rabbit had better hunt a easy one to git up on an' straddle a limb"

"Don't tell nobody dat I done bought dis book, pardner," Skeeter begged. "I wants to gib it a good try-on fust."

"I ain't say nothin'," the darky grinned as he started away. "Dis dollar will gib me a trip to N' Awleens on de steamboat, an' I's gwine to de landin' right now."

When the man had gone Skeeter laid the book aside, and busied himself in cleaning the saloon, wiping off the bar and the tables and sweeping the room. He tried to take his mind off of the book, but the interpretations of his dreams constantly recurred to his mind, and he felt a growing uneasiness.

"I wonder who dem secret enemies is," he sighed. "Dat book oughter had tole me mo' 'bout dat."

He counted off upon his fingers all the negroes whom he did not like; then he counted those whom he knew did not like him; then he exclaimed:

"Dat don't he'p me none. Ef I knows deir names, of co'se dey ain't really secret enemies!"

He sat down at a table, lighted another cigarette, let the hot ash fall from the end and set his trousers

afire. Then he dropped his smoke, put out the fire, and viewed the damage with popping eyeballs.

"Dat's a *bad* sign," he exclaimed. "A nigger ain't in luck whut sets his pants on fire!"

He got up and walked toward the rear exit of the saloon, traveling with jerky, nervous steps, and looking behind him twice with a frightened glance. He seated himself again in the shade of the chinaberry tree, and the book lay upon the chair which his friend had vacated.

Skeeter eyed the volume a long time with increasing uneasiness. The gaudy red-cover design represented a red woman, propped up on some red pillows, asleep, and holding a red fan in her hand. In the background was another red woman waving a wand, and a winged white boy, holding a black hat in one hand and a bag of money in the other. Scattered about on the red woman's red couch were playing cards, envelopes, and one square piece of paper which contained the numbers, "4–11–44."

"I onderstan's dem numbers," Skeeter mumbled to himself. "Whar is 7–11?"

Skeeter lighted another cigarette and puffed it furiously. Twice he reached out his hand to take the book, then drew back without touching it. He looked away several times, but the gaudy cover design attracted him each time with a sort of hypnotic fascination.

"I hadn't oughter bought dis book," he sighed. "A nigger ain't in luck ef he knows too much about his innards."

Finally he overcame his fear to the point where he

ventured to turn the cover, and lo! on the other side was the picture of an aged negro, his black face framed in white hair and beard, his spectacles pushed up on his flat forehead, his mouth spread wide in a snaggle-toothed laugh.

"My Gawd!" Skeeter exclaimed, springing to his feet and gazing at the face with a fear which made his lips tremble, and his hands shake, and his knees knock together. "Dar's a tintype of ol' Swampo, dat wild Affican nigger whut used to live in a holler sycamo' tree in de Little Moccasin Swamp!"

He sat down, resting his elbows on his knees and his face in his hands. For five minutes he strove to recall all that he knew and had heard of Swampo.

He remembered the leering, leathery, wrinkled face of the old half-wit negro, who came to town on every Saturday afternoon, and smirked and bowed and scraped around the white folks, holding out a clawlike hand, begging for a few pennies. Once he had heard a fearful screaming among the blue jays in the swamp, and had crept through the high undergrowth to see what the trouble was; and lo! Swampo had caught a blue jay, had laid the bird on its back, and had pinioned its wings to the ground with forked sticks.

The bird's horrible screams had brought all the jays in that part of the swamp to the spot, and they stood around the imprisoned bird, making loud and profane comments upon his unfortunate predicament. At intervals some blue jay, impelled by curiosity, walked up within reach of the captive bird's claws. Instantly the captive reached out, seized

the bird, and held him a prisoner until Swampo slunk out of the underbrush, grinning like an ape, and released it!

As he thought about this fearful scene, Skeeter's hair stood up on end, just as it had years before when he witnessed it, and had crawled, terrified, away from that vicinity. A cold shiver passed over his sweat-drenched body; he raised his head and eyed Swampo's wide, laughing mouth with superstitious awe.

"Swampo shore is got de laugh on me," he muttered through chattering teeth. "I wish dat nigger hadn't sold me dis book. I ain't no scholard!"

Lighting one cigarette after another to bolster up his courage, he managed at last to put out a trembling finger and turn the book over so he could read the title-page. With the greatest difficulty he spelled it out, giving the peculiar negro pronunciation to the words as he uttered them:

"'Af-ric-an Dream Book an' Fortune Teller, containin' de true in-ter-pre-ta-tion of dreams, an' de numbers of de events to which dey ap-ply. Also prog-nos-ti-ca-tions an' di-vi-na-tions by cards, dice, do-mi-noes, dreams, moles, an' marks, phy-si-og-no-my, phy-si-ol-o-gy, signs, au-gu-ri-es, charms, an' in-can-ta-tions——"

"My good gosh!" Skeeter almost screamed as he sprang to his feet. "Dis is a awful book! Half dem words don't signify nothin'!"

For ten minutes he walked up and down under the trees muttering to himself, his face fear-stricken, his hands trembling, his body oozing with cold sweat.

Then with a mighty resolution he reached out for the book, folded it, and slipped it into his hip pocket.

"Dis book is done skeart me plum' to death," he sighed. "Ef I die, I'll go to hell! I wonder whar Revun Vinegar Atts is at? I's gwine to talk dis over wid some religium pusson!"

The Rev. Vinegar Atts occupied four chairs under a tree in front of the Shoofly church—his body on one, his feet on another, his arms spread wide across the back of two more.

"Howdy, Skeeter?" he exclaimed. "Fotch you out anodder chair from de chu'ch. I needs all I'm got."

Skeeter looked him over and grinned. For a moment he forgot his fears in contemplation of this squat-legged, pot-bellied, moon-faced negro preacher, whose head was bald except for two tufts of hair, one over each ear, which made him resemble a mule wearing a blind bridle.

"You shore is spreadin' yo'se'f out, Elder," Skeeter said, as he set his chair close beside Vinegar. "You look like a buzzard whut is tryin' to fly back'ards an' upside down at de same time."

"I's like a watermillyum vine," Vinegar boomed. "When I gits sot good, I begins to spraddle."

Skeeter reached to his hip pocket and brought out his dream book.

"Whut you flashin' dat book aroun' fer, Skeeter?" Atts asked suspiciously. "De Bible say dat many study is weary on de flesh."

"I needs some advices from a scholard," Skeeter remarked as he lighted a cigarette. "I done smoked

up a whole pack of dese here things in de las' half-hour. I's powerful worrited in my mind."

"You done come to de right place fer advices, son," Atts announced with confidence. "Ef you got anything to ax me, jes' bawl out!"

"Does you b'lieves in dreams, Elder?" Skeeter began.

"Well, suh, dat depen's," Rev. Vinegar Atts announced after a moment of cogitation. "As a preacher, of co'se, I b'lieves in Proverdunce; but ef you 'terrogates me jes' as a common cullud nigger pusson—of co'se dat's plum' diffunt."

"Is you had any dreams recent?" Skeeter inquired.

"Yes, suh; I dreamt about a wash-tub las' night," Vinegar informed him.

"Dis book tells whut dat dream signify," Skeeter explained, as he opened the volume and turned to the proper page. "I reads dis about tubs: 'Ef it be filled wid water, you hab evil to fear; an empty tub signify trouble; an' to run against one, sorrow.'"

"Lawdymussy!" Vinegar bawled.

With a convulsive movement of his body, he kicked the chair from under his feet, hurled the chairs from under his arms, and upset himself falling over on his back with his feet in the air like an overturned bug.

He jumped up, breathing like a foundered horse.

"Fear, trouble, an' sorrer!" he bellowed. "I knowed it! I knowed it wus comin' on all de time!"

He sat down, folded his hands, and gazed around him, his mouth hanging open like the jaws of a bull alligator.

"Here I is, Luck!" he mourned. "Jes' come right along, throw me down, an' set on my head, den gimme a dose of bumpo-calomel an' lemme die! O Lawdy, dat dose of dreams is shore heavy on dis nigger's stomick!"

"Dat's pretty servigerous, Vinegar," Skeeter said mournfully, "but you oughter hear whut dis book prophesy 'bout me!"

"Go 'way, little yeller nigger!" Vinegar exclaimed with a flapping motion of his hand toward Skeeter. "Don't tell me nothin' 'bout yo'se'f! Ain't I got all I kin stan' right now? Look at me—I's skeart already; I's got plenty trouble right dis minute; an' as fer sorrer—I's shore sorry you ever fotch yo' ole yeller mug up on dis hill whar I sets!"

"Whut you gwine do, Elder?" Skeeter inquired in a voice which quavered with fear.

"I's gwine hide out till dese here calamities is done passed over," Vinegar bellowed.

He jerked out a soiled white handkerchief and mopped it around his face, backward across the top of his bald head, and over the back of his bull-like neck.

"Whoosh!" he snorted. "I'll be skeart to eat my vittles! I'll be skeart to go to bed at night! I ain't gwine take no chances wid a dream like dat taggin' behime me!"

Skeeter fumbled with the volume a moment, then inquired:

"Would you wish to own dis book?"

"Who? Me?" Vinegar howled. "Naw, *suh!* Whut a nigger don't know cain't never hurt him; but

ef he knows whut's gwine to happen, he ain't never real sapisfied till it comes to pass."

"Dat's right," Skeeter mourned. "I shore made a miscue when I paid a dollar fer dis book. It's got a tintype of ole Affican Swampo in it—you rickoleck him, Elder?"

"I shore does," Vinegar responded. "De white folks found him dead out in de Little Moccasin Swamp wid a live rattlesnake in his hand!"

"Yes, suh, dat's him," Skeeter said fearfully. "I had done fergot 'bout dat snake."

"Atter dey kilt de snake de white folks foun' dat Swampo wus holdin' it so tight in his dead han' dat dey couldn't git it away from him," Vinegar said. "Dey buried Swampo an' de snake togedder!"

"Listen to dat!" Skeeter exclaimed, his hair standing up on his head. "Ain't dat plum' awful?"

"Whut dey doin' wid Swampo's picture in dat book?" Vinegar wanted to know.

"Dis book is named atter Swampo," Skeeter informed him. "It's called de Affican Dream Book."

"Go 'way wid dat book, Skeeter!" Vinegar bawled. "O Lawdy, I wonder whar I kin borry a rabbit foot at?"

He sprang up, began to search his pockets, and announced tragically:

"I ain't got no luck-charms but a buckeye, a raw pertater, de toof of a hoss, an' de foot of a mud-turkle!"

Then happening to glance down to where a road ran around the foot of the hill on which the church was located, he waved his arms wildly and bellowed:

"Hey, Figger Bush! Come over here a minute! Come prompt, cullud man!"

Figger looked up, vaulted the churchyard fence, and came up the hill toward them, wading through weeds shoulder high.

"Don't you say nothin' 'bout dat book till I borrers his rabbit foot, Skeeter!" Vinegar admonished in a low tone as the two watched Figger's approach.

A moment later, Vinegar said:

"Figger, ain't you got no luck-charms or rabbit foots dat you kin loant me fer a little while?"

"Naw," Figger grinned. "Dey don't do no good. I done tried 'em out!"

"Does you believe in dreams, Figger?" Skeeter asked after the three had seated themselves.

"Shore!" Figger answered, "I dreamed 'bout a rabbit las' night. De Revun is done reminded my mind by axin' 'bout my rabbit foot."

"I's gwine tell you whut dat dream means, Figger," Skeeter announced, looking at his book. "'Rabbit—To dream of a rabbit denotes some bad accidunt.'"

Have you ever seen a goose sitting in a summer shower when a big drop of rain hits him on the top of his head? A whitish film comes over his eyes, he looks up at the sky with a ludicrous appearance of meekness and humble supplication, then ducks his head beneath his wing and waits for the worst to happen.

When this appalling interpretation of his dream struck Figger on the top of his head he looked up at

the sky with filmed eyes, then walked to the middle of the churchyard and stood upright with legs as wabbly as those of a new-born calf.

"Fetch me a chair out here, Skeeter," he howled. "Don't make me stan' up any longer—I mought fall over an' bust my head or somepin. I's gwine set out from under dat tree! Set down in dat chair, Skeeter, an' see ef it is solid—it might break down an' run one of dem spokes clean through me."

Skeeter tested the chair, and Figger sank down upon it with an air of thankfulness. Then he sighed:

"I shouldn't had walked through dem high weeds comin' up here—I bet dar is a snake in dem weeds as long as a railroad track!"

Thus, in one minute, Figger Bush had reduced himself to a hopeless imbecile. The other two looked upon him with pity and compassion, trembling at the dire portent of their own dreams and entering into full fellowship of sympathy with Figger. They sat for a few minutes in silence, then Skeeter Butts announced:

"I reckin I better mosey back to de Hen-Scratch."

"Us is gwine wid you, Skeeter," the other two announced promptly. "We is all sons of sorrer, an' we oughter stick togedder."

At the Hen-Scratch saloon they found Hitch Diamond, Prince Total, and Pap Curtain.

"Whut ails you-alls?" Hitch inquired curiously as he gazed into the frightened faces of his three friends. "You niggers look like you is jes' foun' out you wus borned to die!"

"Dat's a fack, Hitch," Skeeter sighed, as he and his two companions seated themselves on a bench. "Us is all had bad dreams."

"I had a dream las' night," Hitch announced in his deep, rumbling bass. "I dreamed I runned a donkey down an' tied him to a tree, an' he brayed all night. Dat dream woked me up an' I like to never got to sleep no more."

"Does you know whut dat dream means?" Skeeter asked.

"Naw, suh, it's been worritin' me all day."

"Dis book tells whut dreams means, Hitch," Skeeter exclaimed as he opened the pages.

The negroes bunched up close around him, and after a moment Skeeter found the place and read aloud:

"'Donkey—If you see him runnin', brings misfortune; if he is tied you will ex-per-i-ence great loss; if you hear him bray, signifies death.'"

As Hitch Diamond received this intelligence he was a study for the psychologist. His iron features seemed to disintegrate, becoming a heterogeneous mass of conflicting emotions; his giant form seemed to shrink until his garments became too large, and hung loose and flapped around him; his scalp moved, forming a wedge on the top of his head, the point of the wedge at the apex of his skull.

"Oh, swelp me!" Hitch mourned. "I shore hab put up a job on myse'f dis time!"

The negroes gazed upon him with mournful curiosity, but none offered encouragement or sympathy. The fear of the unknown had gripped them all. In

the blazing heat of the mid-afternoon, few living things were stirring, and an unearthly stillness seemed to pervade the entire town of Tickfall. In that vast silence of sun-slashed sky, and drooping, withering earth, and quiet animate life, these six men sat, filled with superstitious awe, appalled by fear of the unknowable, confidently anticipating the very worst of misfortune.

After a long time, Pap Curtain began to fidget.

"Say, Skeeter," he whispered, "I don't hanker atter no trouble, but I dreamed 'bout a cart las' night. I's jes' bound to know whut dat means. See if——"

His whisper ended in a gasp as Skeeter began to turn the pages of the mysterious book with nervous, shaking fingers.

Pap waited, a picture of fear. His long neck rising from his collarless shirt seemed to stretch longer; his mouth, naturally so wide that one could sling a side of bacon into it, hung open loosely, and moisture appeared upon his cracked lip which retained a habitual sneer; his large, shifty eyes rolled back in his head like the eyes of a choking horse; then Skeeter pronounced his doom:

"Here 'tis," Skeeter said, in a voice which sounded unnaturally loud, and which made every listener jump. "'Cart—Its ap-pear-ance indicates ser-i-ous in-ju-ry. If you go upon it or move from it, de in-ju-ry may prove fat-al.'"

"Oh, Lawd, ain't I a fool nigger?" Pap mourned. "I wish I hadn't ast nothin' 'bout dat. I wus feelin' powerful good up to now, but——"

He wiped the sweat from his face on his ragged shirt-sleeve, reached back and jerked a twist of perique chewing-tobacco from his hip-pocket, bit off a chew, and promptly spat it out on the ground with an exclamation of fear.

"I fergot, fellers!" he sighed. "Dat book specify serious injury. Dis terbaccer mought hab a dynamite cap wropped up in it, an' when I chaws dat cap de top of my head will be over yanside de Massassap' River!"

He held the twist off at arm's length, slowly released his fingers, and let it fall to the ground.

"Hey!" Hitch Diamond bellowed, flinching away. "Don't git so brash all of a suddent—be keerful how you drap things aroun' me! I done heerd a donkey bray, an' dat shore signify death!"

Prince Total got up, walked with jerky steps like a string-halt horse into the saloon, and exercising the right of assistant bar-tender, helped himself to a liberal drink of red liquor; thus fortified, he came out and sat down again. He opened his mouth to speak several times, then closed it without a word. He was aching to know the interpretation of his last dream but dared not ask.

"Wus you aimin' to ax somepin, Prince?" Skeeter finally inquired in a lugubrious tone.

Prince shook his head, and Skeeter took out a buckeye and began to shine it up by rubbing it upon the leg of his trousers. At last, when Prince could stand the suspense no longer, he asked in a feeble voice:

"Skeeter, I don't hanker to wish no bad luck onto myse'f, but, please, suh, look an' see do de book say

anything about a wheel? I seed a wheel in my sleep las' night."

"Here 'tis," Skeeter replied promptly. "Down close to de eend of de list. 'Wheel—Is om-i-nous of evil'"

"Dar now, Prince, you done got yourn," Hitch Diamond bellowed.

"I knowed it wus somepin bad," Prince remarked in a weak voice. "Nothin' good don't never happen to a nigger!"

Skeeter Butts dropped the book upon the ground, and it fell open with the laughing face of the gray-haired negro exposed to the view of the men sitting around him.

"Dat Swampo wus in cahoots wid de debbil, fellers," Hitch remarked in a low tone, as he pointed to the picture. "He wus always potterin' aroun' wid buzzards an' sich like. He teached me a song 'bout de turkey-buzzard when I wus jes' a little shaver. It went like dis:

"T-u tucky, t-u ti,
T-u tucky-buzzud eye!
T-u tucky, t-u ting,
T-u tucky-buzzud wing!"

"Aw, hush, Hitch!" Vinegar Atts bawled, as the lugubrious, recitative whine of this song greeted their ears. "Whut you wanter start somepin like dat fer?"

"I wus jes' tellin' you!" Hitch rumbled defensively.

"You niggers know whut?" Pap Curtain exclaimed, springing to his feet. "I's gwine to de

Little Moccasin Swamp an' hide out till dis bad luck goes by."

"Me, too," Prince Total proclaimed. "I ain't gwine meddle aroun' de white folks wid dis hoodoo on me. I'll shore git serious injury."

"Us, too," the other darkies announced promptly.

"Wait till I locks up de Hen-Scratch, niggers!" Skeeter Butts begged. "I ain't gwine sell no mo' booze dis day."

"Less stay close togedder, niggers," Vinegar Atts whined as they started down the dusty road toward the swamp. "Lemme walk in de exack middle of you-alls!"

The nearest edge of the Little Moccasin Swamp lay four miles from Tickfall. It was an oblong stretch of deep, black mud, and deeper and blacker water, measuring twelve miles the longest way, and six miles at its widest.

Except for one place, along the Little Moccasin ridge, it was traversable only by those who knew the swamp well, and had the instincts of a fox or wolf.

It was full of cypress trees and cypress knees, canebrake, and rank weeds, pestilential with disease, and inhabited by countless insects, bugs, worms, snakes, and animate things of that general nature which bit or stung or poisoned. It was the last place on earth which a white man would seek to escape bad luck.

The sun had set before the six negroes came to that point where the swamp came right up to the dusty parish road and ended in a fringe of weedy

undergrowth. In the midsummer heat this undergrowth was ten feet high, making a thick curtain and from the rotting vegetation beneath there came an almost overpowering smell.

As the six negroes walked down the silent road, the darkness in the woods, increased by the interlocked branches of the trees, was intense and overwhelming. The green fringe of the swamp weeds took on fantastic shapes, and the negroes, through their disordered imaginations, beheld claws and wings, and leering eyes, and sneering mouths, and snarling teeth, and painted upon the black canvas of the dark were all the slimy, horrid forms which fear could conceive.

At last they came to the bridle path which branched from the parish road and followed the Little Moccasin ridge to the Dorfoche bayou.

Up to this point in their flight the negroes had traveled in a bunch, but the narrow path now required that they go in single file?

"Who is gwine take de lead?" Skeeter Butts asked.

"Not me," Vinegar Atts bellowed. "My ole maw tole me dat I wus borned under de sign of de goat, but I ain't gwine butt head-fust inter dat swamp. My dream specify fear, trouble, an' sorrer. I got a plenty now!"

"I ain't gwine lead," Figger Bush said positively. "Ef one of dem big swamp jack-rabbits like de one I dreamed 'bout wus to hop acrost my path, I'd straddle eve'y tree in dat swamp!"

"I don't figger on headin' de peerade," Pap Curtain proclaimed. "I got a hunch dat I better take

good keer of myse'f. My dream specify serious injury. It don't take hardly nothin' to hurt a nigger ef luck's agin him."

"I backs out, too," Prince Total declared. "Dat path ain't wide enough fer no wagin wheel, but I ain't sayin' dat a wheel *cain't* run on it!"

"I's gwine fetch up de rear," Hitch Diamond boomed in his deep bass. "Misforchine, great loss, an' death is a plenty fer po' Hitchey to tote along wid de crowd 'thout gittin' ahead of de bunch wid his load."

"Less build us a fire so we kin see!" Skeeter Butts squealed. "I's gittin' de jig-jams standin' here in de dark."

"Us won't need dis fire long," Pap Curtain announced as he pointed to a yellow haze through the tree. "De full moon is comin' up!"

"Bless Gawd fer dat!" Vinegar Atts bellowed. "Us needs two moons!"

When their fire was lighted, Skeeter Butts sat down upon the trunk of a fallen tree which lay beside the road, and said:

"Fellers, dis book is shore handed me a wad of trouble an' sorrer. It specify dat I is powerful bad an' oughter git reformed befo' I dies an' goes to hell; it argufy dat secret enemies is trailin' along atter me; an' it orate dat chi-mer-i-cal plans is tryin' to engage wid me!"

"Whut kind of plans is dem?" Vinegar Atts asked.

"I dunno, Revun," Skeeter said miserably. "It 'pears to me like a preacher oughter know somepin 'bout dat. Whut does you figger it am?"

"Well, suh," Vinegar announced, after a period of deep cogitation, "of co'se I would had to scuffle consid'able to git de real signify of dat long word 'thout no book of commontaters to read up on; but mos' gin'ly speakin', I argufies dat dem kind of plans is invenjums of de debbil."

"How does you know?" Skeeter asked uneasily.

"I argufies dis way," Vinegar declared, boring with his right middle finger into the palm of his left hand to emphasize his remarks: "Ef you is gwine die an' go to hell 'thout reformin' yo' badness, of co'se yo' secret enemies am de debbil an' his angels, an' dem plans you spoke 'bout is a kind of infernum machine like a cuttin'-box. I bet you git bofe yo behime legs chopped off befo' to-morrer mawnin'."

"Lawd," Skeeter sighed pitiably. "I's powerful glad dar's a full moon to-night. She'll git up over dem trees in a little while. I needs mo' light!"

In the light of the fire, Skeeter brought out his dream book, and gazed at the red cover design.

"Ain't dar no good dreams in dat book, Skeeter?" Figger Bush asked.

"Yes, suh, dis book is full of 'em," Skeeter answered.

"Read us some, Skeeter," Pap Curtain begged. "Ef we knows whut dey is, mebbe us kin dream 'em an' bust de hoodoo."

"Here is de fust one I sees," Skeeter replied as he began to read laboriously: "'Lion – To see one denotes admittunce to de sawciety of dis-tin-guish-ed pussons. To sit or ride on de back of a lion denotes de pro-tec-tion of some powerful pussonage. To

dream of eatin' de flesh of a lion denotes some high of-fice——"

"Aw, shuckin's!" Prince Total exclaimed. "A nigger never could dream 'bout no lion. Us might dream 'bout a lizard."

"You better not, Prince," Skeeter warned him. "Listen to dis: 'Lizard—Misfortune through false an' de-ceit-ful friends.'"

"Fer de Lawd's sake, Skeeter," Vinegar howled impatiently. "Look over dat book an' see ain't dar no way to bust a bad hoodoo dream-sign!"

The pages of the dream book rustled for ten minutes while the negroes sat in expectant silence. At last Skeeter squealed:

"I done foun' a new page, niggers! It's all 'bout signs an' omens. It say dis: 'How-ever skep-ti-cal some pussons pro-fess to be on de subjeck of signs which ad-mon-ish an' forewarn——'"

"Aw, cut dat out!" Hitch Diamond growled. "Us b'lieves in 'em—read de signs!"

Thus admonished, Skeeter began:

"'Ef yo' lef' eye-brow be visited wid a tantalizin' itchin', be as-sured dat you are goin' to look upon a painful sight—de corp' of a valued frien'."

Hitch Diamond sprang to his feet, while every negro gazed upon him with fearsome curiosity, at the same time, unconsciously reaching up and scratching their left eyebrows!

"Ef you niggers ain't got no real objections, I'll git out from under dis tree," Hitch said in pitiful tones. "Dis tree is been here 'bout a millyum years, an' I 'speck it's gittin' ready to fall over."

"Dat'd shore wuck a bad accidunt on me," Figger remarked as he moved to the middle of the road.

"Let Skeeter read some mo' signs!" Prince Total howled as he walked out and squatted in the middle of the road like a frog. "Mebbe us kin find somepin dat'll bust Hitch's luck."

"'When you are af-fec-ted by itchin' on de spine of yo' back,'" Skeeter read, "'be assured dat yo'se'f or some one near-ly re-lat-ed to you is about to suffer a violent death!'"

"My Gawd!" Vinegar Atts bawled.

There was silence for a quarter of an hour, while fear gripped the hearts of the negroes with iron fingers and squeezed out all hope, as we crush the water from a sponge.

Vinegar Atts was breathing like the exhaust of a steam engine.

"Revun Atts," Skeeter said in a weak, frightened voice, "I feels powerful bad, an' I was thinkin' dat I'd like to hear a few advices of de Bible preached an' a little religium singin'."

"I cain't he'p you now, Brudder," Vinegar panted. "Wait till I git my breath back. How kin I bawl out wid de message when I's all wind-broke like dis?"

Skeeter waited a few minutes, then turned to his dreadful dream book and began to read, mumbling to himself.

Suddenly Skeeter raised his head with a jerk and gazed up at the moon. He sprang to his feet and began to count on his fingers. The others watched him with intense curiosity. Finally he howled:

"He'p me, niggers; he'p me quick! Whut day of de mont' is dis?"

"Dis is de twenty-six'!" Vinegar panted. "De day of de full moon."

"When did de new moon come in?" Skeeter asked eagerly.

"De new moon wus de tenth!" Pap Curtain informed him.

"Oh, Lawdy!" Skeeter howled, his voice breaking into a sob.

He squatted down and held the book close to the fire, reading aloud to himself in a low tone.

"How many days is passed since de new moon, brudders?" Skeeter inquired in a trembling voice.

"Sixteen!" Vinegar replied, after making the count.

"Us all had our dreams las' night, didn't we?" Skeeter squealed.

"Yes, suh," the chorus answered.

"Lawdymussy, niggers, *we is saved!*" Skeeter screamed, waving his dream book about his head. "I done found a new page in dis book!"

"Whut do she say?" the chorus screamed.

"Listen to dis!" Skeeter panted: "'Jedgments drawn from de moon's age: Dreams on de fifteenth day atter de new moon *will not come to pass;* whatever bizzness a pusson undertakes dis day will prosper. De sixteenth day differs very little from de pre-ced-in'; but any undertakin' on dis day will come to a foolish end.'"

"Bless Gawd!" Vinegar Atts bellowed, springing to his feet. "I's gwine trust de Lawd an' mosey back to Tickfall!"

"Hol' on, niggers!" Skeeter squealed, as the others also sprang up.

Skeeter stooped over the fire and laid his little volume on the interpretation of dreams upon the hot ashes.

"I wish I had my dollar back," he sighed, as the flames leaped up to the added fuel. "Dat shore wus a dam-fool book."

The Gift of Power

VINEGAR ATTS was in trouble.

He sat in the shade of a chinaberry tree in the rear of the Hen-Scratch saloon, his gorilla-like hands nursing his fat knees, his fat stomach resting upon his lap, his moonlike baby face twisted into countless wrinkles as if he were just tuning up to cry. Tiny beads of nervous sweat rolled down his face and neck, and he mopped them off at intervals with an immense red bandanna handkerchief. He jiggered nervously with his ponderous feet, kicking up tiny clouds of sand from the sun-scorched earth. His pipe lay upon the ground by his chair where it had dropped unnoticed when he attempted to put it in his pocket. Skeeter Butts came out of the saloon, carrying his chair. He placed it beside the fat preacher, lighted a cigarette and entered with Vinegar into the silent fellowship of sympathy and understanding.

After a long silence Vinegar said mournfully:

"I cogitate dat they done deeprive me of my goat, Skeeter."

"Yes, sur; dat's so, suh. It 'pears to me dat you is fightin' it out wid yo'se'f fer de las' place in de race."

Vinegar Atts sighed. He picked up his pipe from the ground, filled it with strong perique tobacco,

lighted it, then let the bowl drop off of the stem, scattering the ashes over his lap and spilling the tobacco. Not noticing the accident, Vinegar sucked vigorously on the stem, and gave himself up to gloomy meditations.

"I been de pasture of de Shoofly church fer twenty year hand-runnin', Skeeter," Vinegar remarked at last. "I begged de loose change outen de pockets of de white folks to build dat church. I wus de fust preacher an' de onlies' preacher dey is ever had dar. An' now dey is gwine gib me de farewell go-by."

"Dat new nigger preacher shore is makin' a bull-eye hit wid de members," Skeeter remarked. "You see, de members of de Shoofly church is done got acquainted wid yo' ways. Dey done listened to dem same sermonts fer de las' twenty year——"

"Dey listen but dey don't heed," Vinegar Atts interrupted disgustedly.

"Shorely. Dat's de way mos' church members is," Skeeter replied. "But, you see, dis new preacher he comes in wid a new loud voice——"

"You gimme a good dram an' two sour lemons an' I kin beller louder dan any yuther preacher in de worl'," Vinegar Atts declared.

"Suttinly," Skeeter replied propitiatingly. "But dese Tickfall niggers is done got intimate wid yo' bawl an' it don't sot heavy on deir minds no more. Dey figger dat dey needs a change of tone."

"Dey shore is treated me jes' like a feetball," Vinegar mourned. "Kicked me aroun' scandalous!"

"Is de committee fired you yit?" Skeeter asked sympathetically.

"Naw!" Vinegar exploded. "Ef dey fires me, I'll punch de stuffin' outen deir hides. But I 'spose dey is gittin' ready to send me my resign."

"Dat's powerful bad," Skeeter sighed. "I stuck to you like a frien' because you is always been one of my bes' silent customers. I talked for you awful hard, an' holped you all I could. I's sorry dat dey drapped you down."

"Dat new preacher worked a buzzo on me," Vinegar lamented. "He fotch up in dis town while I wus oozin' along in de Shongaloo woods, an' had all de committee pregaged befo' I got back. Fust news I knowed he had done hogged all de hominy. He hadn't oughter did me dat way."

"He shore did ack familious wid anodder man's job," Skeeter agreed. "But whut made de mostes' hit wus his looks: he's got a new suit of clothes, an' gold eye-specks, an' a ruben ring. He waves a silk handkercher, totes a teethbrush an' wears pink socks."

"All dem things is jes' like de curl in a pig's tail," Vinegar Atts proclaimed. "Dey is ornamental, but dey don't make no more pig!"

"Dat's a fack," Skeeter grinned. "But a pig whut ain't got no ornamint twist in his tail a-tall is suttinly pure scrub!"

Vinegar stooped and recovered the bowl of his pipe, refilled it and began to smoke furiously. Skeeter fiddled with a brass wrist-watch which he wore with prideful ostentation. A hound dog lying upon the saloon steps scratched himself with such a noisy and monotonous knocking of his elbow against the

boards that Vinegar roused himself and hurled maledictions and pine knots at him.

Then Skeeter asked:

"When is de committee gwine hold its las' meetin'?"

"To-morrer night in my orfice in de Shoofly church," Vinegar told him. "I figger dat'll be de las' time I'll ever set by dat table. Of co'se, de committee will vote agin me an' de church will vote wid de committee."

"Whut is you gwine do fer a livin'?" Skeeter asked with interest.

"I done got me a job as Marse Tom Gaitskill's butler," Vinegar said. "Hitch Diamond, he used to buttle fer Marse Tom, but de kunnel specify dat Hitch couldn't show no hon'able scars whar he hurt hisself wuckin', so he fired him. I got Hitch's job."

"Dat wus good luck fer you," Skeeter said in a delighted tone.

"Naw, suh, 'twas bad luck," Vinegar said mournfully. "You see, Hitch is a member of dat church committee, an' he's gwine vote agin me because I picked up de job whut he drapped."

"Lawd," Skeeter sighed. "You is like a snake whut's got his tail in his mouf—jes' spinnin' aroun' yo'se'f in a circuous ring!"

Vinegar picked up his hat and stood up.

"I got to mosey up to Marse Tom's, Skeeter," he said. "De kunnel is gwine hab big comp'ny tonight. I's much obleeged fer yo' pity in my many troubles."

"Pick up a brave heart, Vinegar," Skeeter said encouragingly. "Mebbe de good Lawd will pervide."

"I ain't so certain 'bout dat, Skeeter," Vinegar replied gloomily, as he walked out of the yard. "It looks to me mighty like Proverdunce is done busted a dynamite cap under my shirt!"

Four men sat around the table in the Gaitskill dining-room. The covers had been removed, and they were devoting themselves to an evening of boyish frolic. Everything went.

There was Colonel Tom Gaitskill, an ideal host, courtly, genial, whose fountains of humor never went dry, making him eternally young. Near him sat the Reverend Dr. Sentelle, eloquent, scholarly, whose fine face, seamed and wrinkled with suffering, was written all over with the literature of experience. Across the table was John Flournoy, the sheriff whose reputation exceeded the boundaries of the State, a man with a giant's form and strength, a woman's tenderness, and the courage of a host of jungle beasts.

And the guest of honor for the evening was Gaitskill's life-long friend, Captain Lemuel Manse, a retired millionaire, who had received his title from the fact that he was owner of that beautiful sea-going yacht, whose keel had cut the waters of every sea upon the globe, and which had brought to Tickfall the never-to-be-forgotten Diada.

For four hours Vinegar Atts had served them in that dining-room, silent, watchful, with some mysterious instinct foreseeing the minutest need of every guest and meeting it before the guest himself was conscious what his need was.

The talk had become reminiscent.

"Say, Lem," Colonel Gaitskill remarked, "do you remember how we used to scare the everlasting gizzards out of the niggers on the plantation by holding spiritualistic séances in their cabins?"

"Will I ever forget it?" Captain Manse laughed. "The darkies used to run when they saw me coming!"

"I wonder if you have forgotten how to make the table dance?" Gaitskill asked.

Captain Manse promptly pushed back his chair.

Vinegar Atts had no idea what was going to happen, but he knew instinctively that the table should be cleared. His long arms reached over the shoulders of the men and the liquors and the cigars were placed upon the sideboard.

With fun sparkling in his magnetic eyes, Manse arose and began the repetition of a stunt which had amused him half a century before.

"Gentlemen," he began, in a sing-song voice, imitating the manner of the professional mediums, "there is an even number of us present, which makes a perfect spiritualistic ring. I presume you will smile and chuckle and fling unholy jests at the wonderful miracles which I perform, but I shall most certainly convince you of my close communion with the spirits of the unseen world. You might doubt a professional test, but this is an amateur séance. Here is no hidden machinery. Here are no paid confederates. You are my best friends, and why should I try to fool you? We are all sincere and open to conviction, and any results which are obtained must surely be authentic."

This address concluded amid laughter and applause.

The four men drew up to the heavy mahogany table and placed their hands upon its polished top, palms down.

"My friends," Captain Manse said in a husky whisper, "you will all keep silent, please. You will notice that it looks impossible for any person to move this heavy table by merely placing the hands upon it. No strength can be put into the open palms, it is impracticable to pull or lift or push from the elbows. The legs or feet cannot be brought into use, for they are not allowed to touch the board. And yet the table will move! Silence, gentlemen! If a spirit is present, he will give us a message through the table!"

Several long minutes slowly passed. No sound was audible except the steady, deep breathing of the four men sitting at the table.

As for Vinegar Atts, respiration had ceased some minutes before.

Suddenly, after the long strain of tense silence, Dr. Sentelle, the semi-invalid, took a deep breath—a sigh—and the heavy table rose slowly, teeteringly, under his delicate, fragile, blue-veined hands!

"Ah, some spirit has come at last," Captain Manse exclaimed in a deep, sepulchral, sing-song undertone.

Again there was total silence, and the strain of waiting, and the sweating palms of the men outspread upon the table; Sheriff Flournoy took a long, deep breath.

Again the table tipped, bumped against the floor, and settled down!

"Dr. Sentelle," Captain Manse spoke in a tone hushed and full of awe, "the spirit of my long-lost dead poll-parrot will answer any question which you desire to ask!"

Dr. Sentelle sighed audibly.

He raised his eyes toward the ceiling and in a low, thrilling, beautiful voice, he asked:

"Are you happy, Polly-parrot, since you became a bird of paradise?"

Instantly, the heavy table struck the floor three times—bump! bump! bump! "Y-e-s."

There was a whoop of laughter and the men sprang to their feet.

"By George!" Gaitskill exclaimed with a chuckle. "If some of the experiences Lem and I had when we were young were wiped out of my memory, I wouldn't know my soul in eternity."

"That's right," Captain Manse laughed. "I recall one Christmas day when Tom's niggers were eating in the kitchen, Tom and I went in there and made that table dance all over the place and scared the darkies so they wouldn't touch a bite of that Christmas dinner. Of course, we had to fake that stunt. In fact, most of this spiritualistic stuff is faked now."

"How it it done?" Flournoy asked.

Captain Manse explained several of the methods by which the table-tipping fakes deceived the credulous public, then the talk drifted into national politics.

In a moment Gaitskill looked up with surprise. Did not Vinegar Atts know that the theme of politics called for liquors and cigars?

Vinegar Atts stood beside the door as motionless as a Chinese idol, and his black face, expressive of meditation, mystification, fright and awe, made him almost as ugly as an idol.

But the colonel's look galvanized him into action, and he was once more the silent, well-oiled, efficient machine of service.

"Let's move out on the gallery, gentlemen," Gaitskill suggested after a while. "We'll find it cooler there."

As the men passed out, Gaitskill lingered a moment and said:

"That's all, Vinegar. You are dismissed for the evening."

Vinegar Atts pulled the doors of the dining-room together, waited a moment until he was sure the men had settled themselves upon the gallery, and then he did a very unusual thing.

Seating himself at the mahogany table in the chair which Captain Manse had occupied, he spread his immense black hands palm-downward upon its shiny surface and with a perfect imitation of Manse's manner, sat there for five minutes, in ludicrous, pop-eyed expectation, waiting for something to happen!

He looked up at the ceiling, and down to the table. He pushed on the table-top with all his strength. He drew in a breath which seemed to consume all the air in the room, and emitted a sigh like the exhaust of a blast furnace—but all to no avail.

"It cain't be did widout plenty practice," he assured himself. "But I ain't got nothin' to do all

de rest of dis night but kotch on how to make her jigger!"

He went out to his cabin in the rear of the Gaitskill yard and sat down beside a cheap pine table.

When morning dawned he was still sitting there, puffing and blowing, his sweating palms pressed downward upon the table's rough surface, his credulity unshaken despite his failure, waiting for something to happen!

"Lawd," he sighed. "She ain't even wagged her tail fer me all night long!"

Vinegar Atts spent the day in various activities, some of them of a personal nature, and some under the direction of Colonel Gaitskill.

When evening came he was free, and started on a gloomy walk to the office of the Shoofly church, where the Committee on Pulpit Supply was to hold its last session and determine whether Vinegar should retain the pulpit which he had occupied for twenty years, or surrender his prophet's mantle to another.

Sitting around a cheap pine table in the middle of the room, Vinegar found Pap Curtain, Hitch Diamond, Figger Bush and Skeeter Butts. Of the four, Skeeter was now his only friend.

At the end of the table sat the Reverend Tucky Chew Sipe, a tall, black, thin-faced, ladder-headed negro, whose clothes were so loud that they proclaimed the man a block and a half away. He bore himself with an air of triumph, and gazed upon Vinegar Atts with a look of mingled pity and contempt.

Vinegar was also dressed in the loudest manner his

purse would afford, but the showiest things about him were his extraordinarily large and immaculately white shirt cuffs. His manner was meek and apologetic, utterly unnatural to Vinegar, who had been accustomed for twenty years to butt and bellow like a bull of Bashan among the sheep in the Shoofly fold.

"De meetin' will come to orders an' de sec'tary will specify de bizzness of de las' session," Pap Curtain, the chairman, announced importantly.

"Us didn't do nothin' but gass," Figger Bush answered promptly. "De Revun Vinegar Atts had done made hisse'f abasent, an' us didn't take no action on de Revun Tucky Sipe gittin' de job. Us took a mebbe-so vote, an' all of us favored Tucky Sipe, excusin' Skeeter Butts."

Figger sat down, and Vinegar Atts moved his chair to the table and seated himself close beside the secretary.

"De bizzness of dis meetin' am to choose a preacher fer de Shoofly church," Pap Curtain announced. "Ef anybody is got any speeches on deir mind, let 'em squall out!"

Hitch Diamond arose and cleared his throat.

"Brudders, I feels dat us needs a change. We is done had a fat, squat-leg preacher fer twenty year, an' now dis here spindlin'-shank is come applyin' fer de job, an' I favors him. He knows how to wear clothes, he's got a good-soundin' whoop to his religium advices, an' knows how to tag on de 'rousements when he 'postolizes."

"I feels de same motion, brudders," Figger Bush

put in when Hitch had taken his seat. "Vinegar gibs us good advices, but it 'pears like he cain't make us take 'em. I heerd de Revun Tucky Sipe las' Sunday, an' he gib us cautions jes' like he had done had a session wid de gram-jury. I ain't much mo' dan a seat-member of dis church, but I likes de skinny parsons best."

"I got de same notions in my head, too, brudders," Pap Curtain declared, as Figger sat down. "I is shore dat Tucky Sipe won't slanderize nobody, an' won't snoop aroun' huntin' fer somebody's sins to preach again an' git offen de subjeck dat way. He jes' preaches de true word. I votes hearty fer Tucky Sipe!"

There was a moment of silent expectation, and all eyes were turned toward Skeeter Butts. Skeeter wiggled and clawed at his head, but did not offer to speak. At last, Vinegar Atts said in a husky voice:

"Skeeter, will you please git me a drink of water outen de well. I feels powerful dry in my innards. Dar's a pint tin cup out dar by de water-buckit."

There was another silence until Skeeter returned with the cup. Vinegar drained the contents at one gulp, then turned the cup upside down and set it in the middle of the table.

"Would you wish to relieve yo' mind, Skeeter?" Pap Curtain asked.

"Naw, suh," Skeeter said in an embarrassed tone. "You'all knows dat I favors de Revun Vinegar Atts. Him an' me is good frien's, an' he ain't never did me no harm. I favors keepin' him wid us, but of co'se, I gotter bow down when de vote stan's three to one."

During Skeeter's speech, Vinegar Atts sat beside the table, his hands spread out, palms downward, upon the top.

Suddenly the table began to move! It slid slowly forward, then slipped backward, then tipped up on one end!

"Stop shoving dis table aroun'!" Pap Curtain exclaimed.

Vinegar Atts moved his chair back so that all could see his feet and his knees. Then the table slowly lifted a few inches, and fell with a sliding motion, hitting Pap Curtain a jolt in the stomach, and almost upsetting the smoky oil lamp which occupied the center of the table.

"Hey, dar!" the Reverend Tucky Sipe exclaimed, as he grabbed at the tottering lamp. "Whut ails dat table to make it cut up dat way?"

Vinegar Atts emitted a deep, audible sigh, and his eyes were fixed upon the ceiling in a look of abstracted reverence and devotion.

An awed silence fell upon the men, and Skeeter Butts ostentatiously moved his chair close to the open door. If anything happened, Skeeter intended to lead the getaway.

The heat of the night was intense and overwhelming. Above their heads countless mosquitoes, attracted by the light, circled ceaselessly with an annoying whine of wings. Far away came the rumble of a summer thunderstorm. From a pine tree in the graveyard the voice of a screech-owl quavered like the cry of a child lost in the darkness.

Reverend Tucky Chew Sipe promptly arose and

turned the side pockets of his pantaloons wrong side out—a sure cure for screech-owls!

The men moved back from the table and stared at it with popping eyeballs. Vinegar sat beside it alone, his palms outspread upon its rough surface.

A loud sigh came from Vinegar's throat.

The table slowly rose, teetered for a breathless moment, then fell to the floor with a loud bump. The lamp chimney tottered and fell upon the table, smashing into tiny fragments.

The negroes sprang to their feet in terror—all except Vinegar Atts. He remained with his hands upon the table, sitting as if in a trance.

The lamp wick flared, filling the room with smoke. After a moment Vinegar adjusted the wick, setting the lamp in the center of the table, moving the pint cup to one side as he did so.

Then he moved his chair back from the table and seated himself beside Skeeter Butts at the door.

For a short time no word was spoken. Then the men began to recover their nerve, and Pap Curtain resumed the discussion of their business:

"I figger dat enough has done been said, brudders," he declared. "De lamp chimney is done busted an' us ain't gwine hab no light on dis subjeck very much longer. I motions dat—My Gawd, *whut is dat?*"

This last question was a scream, as Pap pointed with trembling fingers at the pint tin cup. It was moving slowly across the table!

The men watched its erratic movements with breathless fascination. It moved forward toward

the edge, then backward toward the center of the table; then it moved slowly in a circle, and finally took a straight line and toppled off the edge of the table onto the floor!

Every negro jumped about two feet into the air, and bolted into the yard with a loud whoop.

Vinegar Atts alone retained his seat by the door and seemed to be unconscious of what was happening. They looked at him in wonder, not speaking a word.

After a while Vinegar stood up, opened the door which entered into the church auditorium, and returned with a new lamp chimney. Wiping it out carefully with a soiled bandanna handkerchief, he adjusted it upon the lamp, and said in a cordial voice:

"Come in, brudders! Us is done had excitements, but dis meetin' ain't bust up yit!"

The darkies timidly re-entered the room and sat down on the edge of their chairs ready for flight upon the least provocation.

After giving them time to recover their composure, Vinegar said:

"Brudder Chairman, I figger dat it would be doin' de high perlite ef you axed fer a speech from de preacher whut is done served dis communion to de best of his ability fer twenty year."

"Dat's right, Elder!" Pap Curtain said heartily. "Us 'll shore be glad to hear yo' cormitmints!"

Vinegar hesitated a moment, then spoke impressively:

"Brudders, I believes dat a preacher oughter hab some things besides good clothes, spindlin' shanks, a

'rousement voice an' a appertite fer good grub. Does you'all believe dat?"

No one answered the question, but after a pause Pap Curtain inquired:

"Whut else do he oughter hab?"

"He oughter hab de gift of power!" Vinegar roared in a mighty voice. "Does you'all believe dat?"

"Sho'ly!" the men murmured.

"Now, brudders," Vinegar went on, "I built dis here church wid my own hands; I begged de money from de white folks to buy de timber whut went in it; I sawed de wood whut made de pulpit an' de benches, an' eve'y block of wood in dis church knows my hands an' obeys my voice. I got de gift of power!"

He paused. The men looked at the pine table with shifty, frightened eyes.

"When I puts my wide open hand on a piece of furniture in dis church, it gits up an' rambles!" Vinegar bellowed. "De spirits of de onseen worl' tells dem furniture to git up an' hustle! Kin de Revun Tucky Chew Sipe say de same as me?"

Tucky Sipe stared at Atts with the expression of a glass-eyed doll; he fingered a mangy rabbit foot in his left hip pocket; he licked his parched lips with a dry tongue; but he offered no reply.

"When I puts my hands down on dis table, I got de gift of power to make her move!" Vinegar bawled. "Even de tin cups goes ramblin' aroun' when dey hears my hawn!"

He glared around him, his hands clenched, his powerful neck bent, his head lowered as if about to butt—giving a ludicrous imitation of an angry bull

getting ready to make a charge. He walked over to where Tucky Chew Sipe was sitting, and shook an impressive finger before that gentleman's long nose:

"I gib you fair warnin' right now, Tucky Chew Sipe, dat de very fust sermont whut you preaches in dis church will be yo' last—I'll walk up to de side of dis church and put my hands agin de outside wall, an' move dis whole house plum over to de State of Arkansas!"

Vinegar turned, shut the door of exit from the building, locked it and put the key in his pocket. Then he sat down beside the table and spread his hands palm-downward on the top.

He seemed to sink into a trance, his eyes rolled back, his alligator mouth came open, his breath came and went with a loud wheeze, and at intervals a low moan issued from his throat.

The minutes passed. The men watched Vinegar with ever-increasing horror. Tucky Chew Sipe stood up and flattened himself against the wall, his knees shaking until they threatened any moment to collapse and let him down in a heap upon the floor.

Vinegar moaned. A long, deep sigh whistled through the tense silence, and the table rose two feet from the floor, teetering uncertainly. Vinegar rose to his feet, and followed the table in its peregrinations around the room, his hands spread wide and resting upon the top.

"My Gawd!" Tucky Sipe exclaimed.

Instantly the table went high into the air and shot out toward Tucky Sipe, crashing against the wall, striking Tucky a mighty blow in his lean and hungry

stomach, extinguishing the lamp and hurling it to the floor where it broke into a thousand pieces!

Instantly Vinegar Atts struck a match and held it up to illumine the darkness.

He glared a moment at the horrified negroes, then walked over to where the Reverend Tucky Chew Sipe lay flat on the floor in a hysteria of fear, whooping like a siren in a fog.

"Shut up, brudder, shut up!" Vinegar howled. "You done mourned a plenty. Trust de Lawd!"

The match went out and Vinegar struck another.

"Now, honey," Vinegar said to the frightened Sipe, "ef you wants dis church, you kin hab it—but my advices to you is to hunt somewhar fer to git, an' trabbel out to'des dat place right now!"

"Yes, suh," Tucky Chew Sipe said in a voice which strangled in his throat. "I takes yo' advices. I's like dat ole Bill Shazzer in de Bible—I done observe de handwrite on de wall!"

The burning match scorched Vinegar's fingers and he tossed it aside, sucking the blister as he unlocked and opened the door. Then he spoke in the darkness:

"De log-train passes through Tickfall in about ten minutes, brudder. Skeeter Butts will go to de deppo wid you an' speed you on yo' way. You won't make me mad ef you never comes back!"

One hour later Vinegar Atts and Skeeter Butts met in the rear room of the Hen-Scratch saloon.

"De revun made his git-off, Elder," Skeeter grinned. "He specify dat he reternally regretted dat

he wouldn't git no more free vittles from de dearly beloved sisteren, but he 'peared powerful anxious to trabel jes' de same."

"Well, I reckin ef dar ain't no likely cand'date fer my preachin' job, de committee will let me hold on to it, won't dey?" Vinegar asked.

"Suttinly," Skeeter grinned. "Dey say you is done bewitched dat church an' dey is gwine let you keep it till you die."

"Dat's de bes' news I's heerd sence de las' pay day," Vinegar exulted. "I shore do like to bawl de message in dat communion. It he'ps me git a lot of wind offen my breast."

Vinegar took out a soiled handkerchief and mopped the copious sweat from his beaming face.

"Lawd," he sighed in delighted tones. "Ain't it hot!"

"Lay off dat long-tail prancin'-albert coat, Revun," Skeeter said irritably. "You oughter run yo'se'f through a wringer befo' you wear dem clothes—dey makes you too moistuous—you's spoutin' water like a whale right now!"

Vinegar sprang up gladly and pulled off his coat.

Then he glanced at his wrists in shocked surprise, and began to put on his coat again with all possible haste.

But sharp-eyed Skeeter Butts was too quick for him. He sprang up, seized the coat, and wrenched it away.

"Hol' on, Vinegar!" he barked. "Whut you doin' wid all dat harness on yo' wrists?"

Vinegar pulled back his big white cuffs and sheepishly displayed the "harness."

Around each wrist a large leather strap was securely bound, and from each strap, projecting toward Vinegar's fingers was a powerful iron hook with a sharp point!

"Whut in de name of mud is dat fer?" Skeeter howled.

Vinegar grinned, sat down at a little pine table in the middle of the room, spread his open hands upon the table, palms downward, just as he had done at the Shoofly church.

The two iron hooks fitted securely under the edge of the table, and were effectually concealed by his white cuffs. With the grip and the leverage thus secured, the gorilla arms and iron wrists of Vinegar Atts could have lifted a bale of cotton.

Vinegar quietly picked up the little table and grinning like a big fat monkey, pranced all around the room before the astounded, admiring eyes of Skeeter Butts.

Skeeter sat down and chuckled with delight.

"Vinegar," he said, "I always figgered dat a preacher wus a nachel-bawn fool or he wouldn't be a preacher. But atter dis I is gwine hand a tin prize to you fer brains!"

Vinegar could see no particular advantage in confessing that Colonel Tom Gaitskill and Captain Lemuel Manse had spent the entire morning of that day manufacturing Vinegar's harness, and rehearsing him in the sensational stunt which he had pulled off at the Shoofly church.

"You won't make no great big mistake ef you gib me two tin prizes fer brains," Vinegar remarked complacently.

Skeeter clawed at his close-cropped head a moment, then asked another question:

"Elder, how did you make dat tin cup prance all over de top of dat table?"

Vinegar's mouth was filled with chewing tobacco and his soul with peace. He ruminated a minute, grinning at the little barkeeper. When Skeeter began to show signs of impatience, Vinegar answered:

"I put a tree-frog under dat cup," he said.

Owner of Doodle-bug

SUGAR SIBLEY, the dusky belle of the Tickfall Parish Fair, sat in the Jim Crow section of the grand stand, clothed in all the colors of the rainbow, posing with all the indolence and insolence of an African princess, lavishing her charms upon the yellow-faced barkeeper of the Hen-Scratch saloon.

"Whut hoss we gwine bet on next, Skeeter?" she inquired.

"Dunno," Skeeter answered anxiously. "I hopes it'll be a winner."

Skeeter removed his hat and rubbed a nervous hand over a closely cropped head, down the middle of which a part had been made with a razor.

His face was seamed with fine lines of worry, and the nervous sweat pouring down his face had wilted his high, white collar to a soiled and crumpled rag.

"I don't like a nigger whut parts his wool in de middle," Sugar announced, eyeing Skeeter's head, with disapproving looks. "Ef a hoss eats in my trough, his mane is all got to lay on one side."

Skeeter hastily put on his hat.

The band struck up the lively tune of *Rastus, Why Don't You Pay de Rent?*

"Dar now!" Sugar exclaimed. "One dem hosses

in dat nex' race is named Rastus. You go bet ten dollars on Rastus, Skeeter! An' fotch me back some loose change. You ain't winned me nothin' dis whole day."

"I ain't got but ten bucks lef' over," Skeeter confessed. "Ef Rastus don't win, I's shore a busted cornstitution!"

"Whut's dat?" Sugar demanded sharply. "You mean to signify dat you ain't fotch but one hundred dollars out here wid you to entertain a cullud lady?"

"Dat's right," Skeeter declared, "an' I done loss it all but dis here tenner."

"You's gwine lose a lady frien', nigger," Sugar remarked in a disgusted tone. "Nothin' don't talk aroun' me but dollars."

"My talkin' dollars is done expe'unce a vocal breakdown," Skeeter answered shamefacedly.

A tall, yellow negro with a furtive manner, a baboon face, eyes too close together, and lips which carried an habitual sneer, passed them, walked down to the rail, and stopped to gaze up and down the track.

"Does you know dat man?" Sugar Sibley asked.

"Dat's Pap Curtain," Skeeter informed her. "He's de meanes' slick-head nigger in Tickfall."

Then Skeeter left her, walked down to Pap, and said:

"Pap, is you got any money?"

"Shore!" Pap informed him, patting four capacious pockets bulging with silver coins.

"Cain't you loant me a few loose change?" Skeeter pleaded.

"Naw, son," Pap replied positively. "Whenever

I loants money to a frien' I axes dat money an' dat frien' good-by. I ain't never gwine see ary one no mo'."

"I sho' am on de list fer he'p," Skeeter mourned. "I's armin' a she-queen aroun' an' she done et up all my money an' bawlin' fer mo' an' I's skeart she'll pass me down because I's busted."

"Dat's too bad," Pap sympathized. "You had oughter picked de winners."

"Is you winned all dat money wid bets?" Skeeter asked eagerly.

"Naw, suh!" Pap made emphatic answer. "I don't bet on nothin'. I sells tips! I charges one half dollar fer eve'y tip per each."

Skeeter produced his last bill and handed it to Pap.

"Give me nine dollars and fifty cents change, Pap," he said eagerly, "an' a tip on de winner of de nex' race."

Pap handed back the change, caught Skeeter by the arm, led him to one side out of ear-shot of all other negroes, and whispered impressively:

"Swa'r befo' Gawd dat you won't tell nobody whar you got dis tip!"

"I prommus!" Skeeter murmured.

Pap bent down, cupped both hands around Skeeter's ear like a trumpet, and whispered hoarsely:

"Rastus!"

Skeeter's little legs bounced him down the steps of the grand stand and for the next ten minutes he circulated assiduously among the negroes placing his private bets.

When Skeeter had gone Pap Curtain turned his

back to the track and gazed upward in worshipful adoration of Sugar Sibley as if she were the saint of his deepest devotion. The gaudy princess opened wide her large eyes, then squinted them, then slowly closed one eye and smiled.

Pap promptly pranced up the steps and seated himself in the place vacated by Skeeter Butts. He did not act like a stranger, nor as if he regarded an introduction necessary.

"Howdy, Sugar?" he remarked. "I argufies dat yo' name fits you' corporosity like a candy jaw-breaker fits a pickaninny's mouf."

"You ain't entirely wrong, Popper," the lady grinned. "I's shore a sweet cake to de coon whut's got de dough to mix wid de sugar."

"Skeeter Butts jes' now specify to me dat he's nearly out of mixin's," Pap muttered, fumbling at his own silver-laden pockets.

"All right, Popper," Sugar announced complacently. "Me an' you will let dat Mr. Muskeeter fly up de creek."

"Ef he won't fly away us'll screen him off," Pap snickered.

Their conversation was brought to an abrupt close by a loud whoop from the spectators. Five horses were loping around the track—loping leisurely in spite of the fact that their frenzied jockeys were using whip and spur at every jump. But the racing game was new to these humble plough-horses, and their idea seemed to be that if they reached the wire before the sun set the day's work would be done.

But the jockey on Rastus found a tender place on

his mount's tick-bitten flank and managed to provoke a spurt of speed which put Rastus two lengths ahead and kept him there. Rastus won!

Flushed with his triumph and rattling his money, Skeeter Butts came to where Pap and Sugar were seated, tossed five dollars in Sugar's lap, and glared at Curtain.

"Git outen my seat, Pap!" he commanded. "You's tryin' to deeprive me of my gal!"

"Naw, suh," Pap answered promptly. "I ain't intend no depravity. Besides, I gotter go. 'Bout fawty niggers wants to cornverse me 'bout dis nex' race."

"Whut hoss we gwine bet on nex', Skeeter?" Sugar Sibley asked when Pap had gone.

"I dunno," Butts replied, promptly regretting that he had not been more gracious to Pap Curtain. "Which way did Pap went?"

"Whut you want wid dat ole man?" Sugar asked suspiciously.

"Pap is sellin' tips," Skeeter explained. "He teched me off 'bout Rastus winnin' dat las' race atter he made me prommus I wouldn't tell nobody."

"I don't b'lieve it," Sugar snorted. "I picked Rastus myself when de band was playin' dat tune. How do Popper Curtain know whut hoss is gwine win?"

"I dunno," Skeeter answered. "He's a slick-head nigger an' mebbe he's got a conjure."

"Ef Popper knowed whut hoss wus gwine win, he wouldn't sell no tips," Sugar sniffed. "He'd bet!"

"Mebbe dat's so!" Skeeter agreed, his confidence shaken by this argument. "But ef you's so good at pickin' de winner, s'pose you name de nex' one?"

Sugar glanced at a large blackboard under the starter's stand where a red-headed boy was chalking the names of three more horses.

"*Doodle-Bug!*" she exclaimed eagerly. "Bet on Doodle, Skeeter!"

Butts walked away, but before he placed a single bet he trailed Pap Curtain until he found him, placed a half-dollar in Pap's willing palm, and demanded the name of the winner.

Again Pap cupped his hands around Skeeter's ears and whispered:

"Doodle-Bug!"

Skeeter took a big breath. Then he got busy. First he found his friend, Figger Bush.

"Figger," he panted, "loant me ten dollars. Ef I never pays it back yo' credick is good at de Hen-Scratch till you drinks dat much liquor up."

Figger counted out the money, and Skeeter raced around until he had borrowed a similar sum from Hitch Diamond, Prince Total, an Mustard Prophet, thus increasing his supply of money until he had fifty-five dollars. Then he raced around some more, betting every dollar on Doodle-Bug.

Walking back to the grand stand, he found Pap Curtain engaged in a lively conversation with Sugar Sibley. Jealousy boiled in Skeeter's heart and his saddle-colored face flushed to a brownish crimson. He strode to where they were sitting and began:

"Looky here, Pap, you let my nigger gal alone. I

don't want no ole gray-wool baboon monkeyin' aroun' whar I cotes a lady. You hike outen dis!"

"Set down, son, and watch de race!" Pap responded in a patronizing tone. "A nigger hadn't oughter git uppity when he bets his las' dollar on Doodle-Bug. Doodle might run in de groun'."

At that moment Doodle galloped onto the track, and Skeeter postponed his quarrel to watch the horse which carried his money.

Doodle-Bug was a white-faced Tuckapoo mustang; and the Tuckapoo mustang is the beast which the Louisiana Indians purposely left behind when they were forced to migrate to Indian Territory, to wreak vengeance upon the paleface for depriving them of their patrimonial landholdings. Besides being able to buck, bite, and kick like other horses, the Tuckapoo mustang can butt like a goat, break a man's jaw by switching his tail, and has the deer's trick of jumping high in the air and coming down on top of a man, spearing him to the ground with his four stiff legs. He has more ways of ridding himself of his rider than a trick circus mule, and, unlike the circus mule, he is not good-natured about it.

Doodle-Bug balked in front of the grand stand, and seven men tried to induce him to go. Four got kicked, one got bit, the jockey was bucked off, and finally Doodle-Bug laid down on his back, squealing like a pig, his four legs fanning the air like the legs of an overturned beetle.

The men backed away from those rapid-firing legs and waited until it pleased Doodle-Bug to get up.

Thereupon Pap Curtain walked down to the rail

motioned the little jockey to him, and issued instructions:

"Turn dat Doodle-Bug aroun', Jim, an' back him up to de startin'-place. He balks because he figgers you is tryin' to make him go aroun' de track de wrong way. Face him right an' back him up, an' when he gits started, he'll run like a rabbit!"

Skeeter and Sugar heard this advice, and it restored Skeeter's hopes in the horse. Sugar, anticipating a share in Skeeter's winnings, became extremely gracious.

"Come an' set down by me, Skeeter," she said. "You an' Popper Curtain kin set on each side of me an' I'll set in de middle. 'Tain't no use fer you to be jealousy of dat ole man. He's ole enough to be my daddy, an' I's jes' bein' gentle to him. I's dead stuck on you!"

Pap Curtain joined them, and the three sat down to watch the race.

Doodle-Bug got a flying start, and did well for a quarter; he was running second at the half; he took last place at the three-quarters' post, and came in after all the shouting was over, jeered by a few children as he loped past the grand stand.

Skeeter Butts crumpled up beside Sugar Sibley, in the saddest of all the plights which a lover experiences—dead broke!

Pap Curtain got the giggles.

Sugar Sibley pretended not to notice when Skeeter Butts arose and slunk away.

The racing was over for the day, and Sugar Sibley rode back to Tickfall in Pap Curtain's hired buggy.

"Pa Curtain is done played a buzzo on me, an' I wants revengeance," Skeeter Butts soliloquized bitterly, as he sat behind the bar of the Hen-Scratch saloon.

The swinging doors were thrust open, and Hitch Diamond, Mustard Prophet, Prince Total, and Figger Bush entered the room.

"We wants our money back, Skeeter," they announced in a chorus.

"Yo' credick is good fer ten dollars per each, niggers," Butts said with a sickly grin. "I bet on Doodle-Bug an' Doodle didn't do."

There was a whoop from the four negroes, then each handed Skeeter certain derogatory remarks calculated to reduce his self-esteem to the minimum.

"Pap Curtain tipped me off on Doodle," Skeeter said defensively. "I don't know nothin' 'bout pickin' em."

There was a moment of surprised silence; then Hitch asked:

"Did you pay him for de tip, Skeeter?"

"Suttinly. He charged me fo' bits."

"Dat sho' is curious," Hitch said in a perplexed tone. "Now Pap gib me a tip on dat race an' he said Dixie would win."

"Dat's whut he tole us," Mustard and Figger chimed in.

"I don't kotch on to dat," Prince Total declared. "Pap sold me a tip on dat same race, an' he said Rooster would win."

"Huh," Skeeter Butts grunted, "dat shows whut a slick-head nigger Pap is. He wucks it dis way—he

tole twenty niggers dat Doodle-Bug would win; den he tole twenty mo' niggers dat Dixie would win; den he tole twenty yuther niggers dat Rooster would win —an' dar warn't but three hosses in de race. Of co'se he picked a winner fer twenty of dem niggers, an' he picked a near winner fer twenty mo', an' he tuck up cont'ibutions of fifty cents from sixty niggers, an' fawty of 'em come back to git anodder tip!"

"My Lawd!" the quartet mourned in righteous indignation. "Pap hadn't oughter did us dataway!"

"Dat's all right," Skeeter said consolingly. "We gits one mo' day of racin' to-morrer, an' I's doin' some heavy thinkin'. When I gits my plan all ready, ef you niggers will he'p, we'll git Pap Curtain an' 'vide him up—hoofs, hide, horns, an' taller!"

"We's wid you, Skeeter!" they shouted. "You kin sottle you' owe-bills wid us when we 'vides up Pap's pickin's."

The men tramped out of the saloon, and ten minutes later the door swung open again, admitting Pap Curtain.

"De good Lawd is sho' heerd my prayer," Skeeter murmured thankfully as he rose to his feet.

Pap came straight to the bar, laid down a five-cent piece, and remarked:

"Gimme a big beer, Skeeter."

Skeeter set the drink upon the bar, then, under pretense of wiping the bar with his rag, flicked the coin so that it fell on the floor at Pap's feet.

When Pap stooped to pick it up, Skeeter quietly emptied the odorless contents of a tiny vial into the glass.

"Put de nickel back in yo' pocket, Pap," Skeeter said pleasantly when Pap tendered it again. "It's my treat. Less sot down at de table an' cornverse awhile."

The two sat down, sipped their drinks for a moment, then Skeeter remarked:

"Dat wus mighty bum racin' we had to-day."

"Shore wus," Pap agreed. "Dar ain't never no real racehosses at dis fair. Ef a feller's got a hoss whut kin run a little, he picks the cockle-burs outen his tail, fotches him to town, and enters him in de race."

"You come out powerful good, Pap," the barkeeper said admiringly. "You muss 'a' made a whole passel of money."

"Yes, suh, I done it," Pap assured him, draining his glass of liquor as he talked. "I didn't bet none. I jes' sold tips. But I shore had bad luck wid dat money at de las'."

"Whut happened?" Skeeter inquired with great interest.

"You remember dat Sugar Sibley you wus wid? Well, suh, dat gal jes' nachelly hoodooed me outen eve'y dollar I had on me, excusin' dis one poor, lonesome nickel. She said she wus skeart I would git in bad comp'ny an' lose it!"

"My Gawd, Pap!" Skeeter exclaimed, springing to his feet. "Whyn't you tell me dat terr'ble news sooner?"

Pap did not answer. His head fell forward on his chest; his hands hung limply at his sides; he breathed stertorously, with his mouth open.

Skeeter ransacked Curtain's pockets.

They still sagged from the weight of the coins they had contained, but now—they assayed only one five-cent piece!

Hitch Diamond, admitted into the Hen-Scratch saloon through the rear door early the next morning, was horrified to see the unconscious form of Pap Curtain lying on a pallet in the corner of the room.

"Whut's come to pass wid Pap?" he inquired.

"Knock-out draps," Skeeter answered disgustedly.

"When you gwine 'vide up de money?" Hitch grinned.

"Ax Sugar Sibley," Skeeter responded. "She beat me to Pap's pockets, an' never lef' me nothin' but a buff'lo jitney."

"Whar is dat Sugar Sibley?" Hitch asked earnestly.

"Dat's whut yo' job is right now—find dat nigger woman!"

"Whut'll I do when I gits her?"

"Cote her servigerous!" Skeeter informed him. "Find out whar she keeps dat money. Ax her whut's she gwine do wit it!"

"Dat looks like a dangersome woman to me," Hitch remarked uneasily. "Whar do she come from, Skeeter?"

"Gawd knows!" the barkeeper answered. "I's heerd her say somepin 'bout Baton Rouge. Mebbe she stays dar. She made google eyes at me in de grand stan' an' I tuck up wid her."

"I'll go out and make inquirements an' see whut I kin do," Hitch said.

"When you find out somepin, come back an' repote."

Two hours later a buggy stopped in front of the Hen-Scratch saloon and Sugar Sibley leaned out like a drowsy stage-queen, and languidly called for Skeeter Butts.

"'Mawnin', honey," she said graciously. "Is you gwine out to de fair to-day?"

"Suttingly," he told her. "Dis here is Nigger Day."

Sugar leaned over and whispered:

"Is you saw Popper Curtain dis mawnin'?"

"Naw," Skeeter lied glibly.

The woman hesitated a moment as if debating her next move. Then she said:

"Skeeter, dat little brown hand-satchel at my foots is full of money. I wants you to keep dat coin fer me until atter dinner an' den fotch it out to de races. I's gwine bet big money on dem races to-day an' I wants you to do my runnin' fer me. I wus gwine ax Popper Curtain to do it, but he's done made hisse'f absent."

Skeeter lifted the satchel out of the buggy with an eager hand.

"Don't say nothin' to nobody, honey!" Sugar cautioned with a smile as she drove away.

Skeeter sat down behind the bar with the satchel of money between his feet and tried to think. This last incident had nearly unsettled his reason.

After a long period of meditation he arose and tip-

toed into the room where Pap Curtain lay and examined the prostrate man long and attentively. He shook him by the shoulder—not too hard. He kicked him—gently. Then he remarked with great satisfaction:

"He won't wake up till mighty nigh dark. By dat time de fair will be over an' Sugar will be gone away on de excussion, an' I won't know nothin' a tall!"

When Skeeter entered the saloon again he found Hitch Diamond waiting for him.

"Skeeter," he said with an air of dejection, "I foun' dat nigger gal ridin' 'roun' town in a buggy, an' she pronounce dat she ain't gwine arm roun' wid no kind of nigger excusin' a high-yaller coon like you. She say she's dead stuck on you, an' she gimme de go-down."

"Dat's right, Hitch," Skeeter replied complacently. "Dem arrangements I made wid you is all called down. Me an' Miss Sugar is done made a trade."

"Whar does I come in on de trade?"

"You comes in right now, Hitch," Skeeter said affably. "I's gwine pay you dat ten dollars you loant me."

From the brown hand-satchel under the bar Skeeter counted out ten silver dollars and passed the money to his friend. Then he said:

"Now, Hitch, you go find dem yuther niggers I owes an' fetch 'em in here in a bunch, because I wants to talk to all of you an' fix up a plan."

Half an hour later Hitch re-entered the room, fol-

lowed by Prince Total, Mustard Prophet, and Figger Bush.

Out of Sugar's hand-satchel Skeeter counted thirty dollars, arranged them in piles of ten dollars each and pushed them across the bar to the three negroes.

"Now, niggers," Skeeter remarked, "I don't owe nary one of you nothin'."

"Dat's right!" they exclaimed, pocketing the money.

"Now you listen to me: Sugar Sibley specify dat she's gwine bet big to-day. I's her runner. Now you niggers git all de loose change you kin borry an' steal an' be out dar. Ef Sugar wins I'll tip you-all off whut her bet is. Ef Sugar lose I'll place all her bets wid you-alls, an' atter de races is over us'll 'vide up."

"Dem kind of exhort sho' edifies my mind, Skeeter," Hitch Diamond boomed, "an' us is wid you!"

When the negroes had gone Skeeter counted the money remaining in the hand-satchel. It was nearly two hundred dollars.

The last day of the Tickfall fair was always given over to the negroes. Every darky who had a horse or mule was privileged to enter the animal for any race without paying a fee.

Under such an arrangement the chief attraction was the races, and the betting was wild and reckless. There was no betting-shed, no bookmakers. The gamblers circulated among their friends and placed private bets.

Skeeter Butts was perfectly happy. Whenever Sugar lost, he won; if Sugar won, it was no loss to him.

"Five hosses runs in de nex' race, niggers," Skeeter informed his fellow conspirators, in their operations to separate Sugar Sibley from her money. "Sugar bets on Hooligan. Ef Hooligan wins, each of you-alls is gotter gimme two dollars an' fo' bits; ef Hooligan lose, I splits dis ten-bill fo' ways."

Hooligan lost.

"Which hoss we gwine bet on nex', Skeeter?" Sugar laughed.

"I ain't no good jedge," Skeeter grinned. "I foun' out yistiddy dat sometimes dey runs bad an' de nex' time dey runs wuss."

Three mules came loping down the track, and Sugar picked Hot-Dog for a winner, instructing Skeeter to place five dollars on that mule.

Hot-Dog started around the track as if he were going to eat it up, grew weary of the journey at the half-mile post, brayed, turned around, and galloped back to the grand stand, meeting the other two mules as they came under the wire.

Toward the close of the races Sugar Sibley began to complain.

"I sho' is had bad luck, Skeeter," she mourned. "Done bet my good money on five different races an' ain't winned a dollar. How come?"

"Dunno," Skeeter murmured. "Mebbe ef I go down by de stables an' pick up some tips——"

"Huh!" Sugar snorted. "I done tried dat game befo'. Down in Baton Rouge I made love to eve'y

nigger stable-boy, nigger rubber, nigger jockey, nigger trainer, an' nigger owner on de track."

"Didn't dey gib you no hot tips?"

"Shore! An' eve'y time dey gimme a hot tip de hoss I bet on got cold foots—but I got scorched good an' plenty!"

"Dey's shore makin' cracklin' outen yo' hide here," Skeeter snickered. "Dese niggers will all die water-millyunaires ef yo' pile holds out long enough."

"I don't keer," Sugar said finally. "Dis here money ain't cost me nothin', an' 'tain't no loss ef I loses it."

"Dat's de right talk," Skeeter exclaimed. "Less spend it all. I ain't never wasted money like dis befo', an' I likes de exoncise."

"We's got to waste it all on de nex' race, den," Sugar snickered. "Dar ain't but one mo' race. Whut hoss we gwine lose on now, Skeeter?"

A red-headed boy climbed up a ladder in front of the starter's stand to write the names of the horses in the next race on a blackboard.

"De fust name he writes totes my money!" Sugar proclaimed.

Then she watched a white hand chalking a scrawly signature.

"My Gawd!" Sugar and Skeeter exclaimed in one breath. "He's done writ Doodle-Bug!"

With a tragic look on her face, Sugar Sibley stooped down, picked up the brown hand-satchel lying between her feet, and handed it to Skeeter Butts.

"I'll expire game, Skeeter!" she said in a weak,

shaky voice. "Bet it all—dollar fer dollar! Dis am de finish!"

Skeeter looked at her a moment, started to say something, then walked away in silence. Once out of her sight he ran with all speed in search of Hitch Diamond, Prince Total, Mustard Prophet, and Figger Bush.

"Git busy, niggers!" he howled. "Sugar bets dollar fer dollar on Doodle-Bug!"

"She'll git accommodated up!" Prince Total guffawed. "Us niggers is gwine borry all de money on dis fair ground."

"Why don't she jes' hand us dat brown satchel?" Figger Bush giggled.

"She wants some fun fer her money," Skeeter grinned. "She's a real, true spote."

"Let me be de stake-toter?" Hitch Diamond giggled.

"Dat suits me," Skeeter agreed. "Us'll go up an' stan' by Sugar, an' eve'y time dese yuther niggers fetches you a dollar I'll put one on top of it. Us'll do dis las' race up in real good style."

As Mustard and Prince and Figger made successive trips through the crowd of negroes, coming back each time with a little silver, Skeeter Butts noted with uneasiness the absence of certain cheap watches, brassy finger-rings, and gaudy, sparkling scarf-pins.

Finally Figger Bush placed a fifty-cent piece against Sugar's choice and sighed:

"Ef dat Doodle wins Gawd knows whut *dis* dude'll do! I's done bet de barlow-knife outen my pocket

an' borried money on dese very clothes I wears. I's plum busted, popped open, cleant out!"

Three horses loped up toward the starting pole.

Skeeter observed with satisfaction that Doodle-Bug balked right in front of the grand stand, that half a dozen men tried to make him move and failed, that the little jockey was bucked off, and that Doodle-Bug finally turned a complete somersault, landing on his back.

"Doodle-Bug is actin' in form," Skeeter grinned.

"He'll run like a skint rabbit!" Sugar Sibley exclaimed, licking out her tongue, which was as dry as a shuck and felt as large as a doormat.

"I done seen him run!" Skeeter answered sarcastically.

The little negro jockey, mindful of the instructions received from Pap Curtain the day before, stood in front of the ugly tempered Tuckapoo mustang, slashing at the animal's knees with his whip.

Reluctantly the horse moved backward step by step, and thus the jockey finally worked him to the starting place.

There was a mighty roar from the crowd, which became a thunderous clamor at the starter's word:

"*Go!*"

Sugar Sibley, who had sat unmoved amid the losses of the entire afternoon, suddenly sprang to her feet, ran down to the rail, shrieking like a calliope, begging for Doodle-Bug to run, praying for Doodle-Bug to win, her wailing cry, like the clear notes of a trumpet, heard above the gigantic ululation of the crowd:

"*Go, Doodle, go!*"

And Doodle went!

At the quarter pole he was two lengths ahead; at the half he led by five lengths; at the three-quarter pole the two other horses were trailing one hundred yards behind. Doodle-Bug came under the wire so far in advance that half the people had left the grand stand for their homeward trip before the other horses arrived!

Faint, weak, giddy, Sugar Sibley staggered back to Skeeter Butts, reeling like a drunkard, clutching at her throat for its hoarseness, dripping with perspiration, her eyeballs burning like coals of fire.

"My Gawd!" Skeeter moaned. "Whut's done gone an' happened to dat Doodle-Bug?"

"Nothin'!" Sugar Sibley panted. "Doodle's all right. Doodle belongs to me. He was riz an' borned on my little farm an' my chile Jimmy is a ridin' him. Us always makes a killin' on Nigger Day at the parish fairs."

She took the empty brown hand-satchel out of Skeeter's nerveless hands and opened it.

"Pour dat money in dis bag, Hitch!" she commanded. Then she uttered a wail, collapsed into a heap upon the seat, and her mouth dropped open like an imbecile's.

Hitch Diamond had mysteriously disappeared!

Dizzy, nauseated, sweating at every pore, Pap Curtain sat up in the middle of his pallet in the rear room of the Hen-Scratch saloon, his tongue as dry and thick as if his mouth were filled with cotton-seed hulls. He moved his head and an iron wedge rolled

off the apex of his crown and bumped against the inside of his cranium like a rock rattles in a tin can.

"He'p! Come here, eve'body!" he bawled, balancing his head and steadying it with both hands to keep the wedge from bumping against a new place.

"Little Bit—Lawdymussy! My head hurts inside and outside!" he howled to the diminutive assistant barkeeper of the Hen-Scratch saloon.

Little Bit stood beside him, giggling, holding out a half-pint flask.

"Skeeter Butts say gib you dis as soon as you woked up!" he said.

Pap took the bottle, removed the cork; then his hand drooped limply, his head dropped to one side, and the precious fluid was pouring out upon the pallet.

"Hey, dar!" Little Bit shrieked, rescuing the liquid from total loss and kicking Pap into consciousness. "Git up an' drink dis med'cine!"

Pap swallowed the contents of the bottle, then asked:

"Whut time is it, Little Bit?"

"It's mighty nigh night."

"Whut day is dis?"

"It's jes' de same day whut it's been since mawnin'," Little Bit informed him.

"Whut does you call it?" Pap howled impatiently.

"I calls it to-day," Little Bit answered.

"Oh, lawdymussy!" Pap bawled. "Whut a fool!"

"Yes, suh, dat's right!" Little Bit agreed innocently. "You shore is been a whopper!"

Then the medicine which Skeeter prescribed began to take effect, and Pap Curtain felt the revival of his faculties and his strength. He staggered to his feet, stumbled out of the rear door, and disappeared. He went straight to the home of Sugar Sibley, and found Sugar in the wildest hysterics.

Weepingly she told him the tale of her gains and of her great loss. Pap could sympathize with her, for on the day before he had experienced both himself.

Finally Pap said:

"Shut up, Sugar. You done lamented a plenty. Dem niggers whut stole dat money is gone out to de old fish-camp to 'vide it up. Ef you rides out dar right now, you kin ketch 'em at it!"

Twenty minutes later Sugar Sibley stopped Doodle-Bug behind a thicket at the old fishing camp on the Dorforche Bayou, and peered over the top of the bushes where she could hear masculine voices in hot debate.

In fact, it had been a day of such frenzied finance for the five negroes that an expert accountant could not have told what would be an equitable division of their spoils. So the thieves had fallen out, and their voices were raised to high pitch.

What Sugar saw filled her heart with hope and gladness.

Skeeter Butts, with a pile of money lying between his knees, was sitting on the ground, four other negroes watching the count, stopping at intervals to quarrel, but listening to the refrain of Skeeter as it crooned to the musical accompaniment of falling coins:

"A dollar fer me, a dollar fer Hitch, a dollar fer Mustard, a dollar fer Figger, an' a dollar fer Prince!"

Their business was interrupted by a loud whoop.

A Tuckapoo mustang with a white face thrashed through the underbrush, and Sugar Sibley swept down upon them like an avenging fury, flourishing an immense pistol which cracked three times, the bullets kicking the dirt into the faces of the stooping men.

The five men, leaving their money untouched, got up and went away from the place with astonishing speed.

Sugar dismounted, crammed her money into her brown hand-satchel, jumped on the back of Doodle-Bug, and rode away.

An hour later, as the five weary, disconsolate men trailed back to town, they noticed in front of Pap Curtain's cabin a Tuckapoo mustang with a white face.

Pap sat upon the porch, his mouth filled with chewing-tobacco and his heart filled with vast content.

Skeeter Butts spoke. "Pap is you saw anything of Sugar Sibley?"

"Suttinly," Pap answered. "She's layin' in my cabin on de bed, takin' a little nap."

"You ain't married to her, is you?" Skeeter asked after a moment of meditation.

"Who? Me?" Pap Curtain roared. "Naw! Sugar is my gal! *I'm her daddy!* Don't you remember my gal, Skeeter? Dey used to call her Sweet befo' her maw lef' me an' went down to Baton Rouge."

Skeeter did not answer, and the gloomy procession moved on. Finally Skeeter Butts mumbled:

"Yes, I remembers dat gal when she warn't more'n hawn-high to a billy-goat. But I's had expe'unce dis day dat eve'thing ain't sweet whut's called Sugar!"

Every Pose a Picture

I

AN ALL-COON CAST

MR. SHIRLEY ROUKE was one of the first-born sons of the silent drama.

The first moving picture ever thrown upon a screen in the city of New Orleans was projected by the capable hand of this red-headed Irishman.

In the famous resort known as West End, on Lake Pontchartrain, half of the inhabitants of the Crescent City assembled to watch the revelation of a two-hundred foot film which showed a man walking down the street, a dog trotting across the street and a horse and buggy going up the street!

Thrilled by this vision, the people roared their applause until the porpoises sporting far out in the lake dived for deep water.

In a short time the thrill and novelty of a plotless jumble of pictures wore off, and Mr. Rouke was quick to inform the Gitagraft Company that the people wanted stories—the pictures must have a punch and tell a tale. Then came an era of real plays and real actors and dramatized novels and sce-

narios written by authors whose names were famous across the continent.

"Do the newest thing first!" was Rouke's motto. His active brain devised novelties like a liver secretes bile, and after each sensational innovation the Gitagraft Company counted its receipts, raised Rouke's salary, and told him to go the extreme end of the limit.

Just as the theatrical managers delight to announce an all-star aggregation of actors, so Shirley Rouke had been the first motion picture director to feature an All-Native picture showing the native haunts and the natural characteristics of one race or tribe of people and using the natives and actors in the films.

At the foot of the Rocky Mountains he produced an All-Indian picture. In the far north, where the midnight sun casts a shadow on the snow, he got an All-Eskimo picture. At the entrance of the Shoguns' temple in Tokio he began an all-Japanese picture which moved in exquisite beauty through the blossom-laden cherry groves, the wistaria-festooned tea houses, across the sacred bridge at Nikko, and ended at last with the happy lovers climbing the Jabob's Ladder on the island of Enoshima.

He had just returned from China with an all-Chinese picture which began in the Botanical Gardens of Hong-kong, concluded its first reel at the Temple of Confucius in Canton—"One Minute Please!"—sailed down the Canton River on a Chinese flower boat, and concluded its fifth reel with a public execution on the northern frontier of the

Mongolian Empire under the shadow of the Great Wall.

He was now taking a two days' rest in the office on Fifth Avenue and looking around for more worlds to conquer when, lo!—

"Niggers!" he bawled, springing to his feet and slapping the back of Peter Pellet, his camera artist. "An All-Coon Cast! Pack up your night-shirt, Peter! Us for the slimy cypress sloughs of the Sunny South!"

Peter Pellet's participation in Rouke's wild innovations had taught him that life, like his name, was a pill. He swallowed it loyally, but he reserved the inalienable right to petition and protest whenever Rouke grabbed him by the nose, pried open his mouth, and offered him another bitter dose.

"Aw ferget it!" he began. "A nigger can't act. The nigger minstrels are all white men."

"Sure!" Rouke agreed. "But they imitate niggers. That's what makes them so funny. Nigger minstrels make a hit all over this country. Oh, sugar! the latest line of laugh looseners! Be ready, Pete! We leave on the night train."

"May I ask what part of the South you expect to invade?" Peter inquired in a sour tone.

"We'll honor the Pelican State with our presence," Rouke grinned. "I know a man who knows niggers just like he had been a red corpuscle of their blood and had gone all through 'em. His name is Gaitskill, and he's the loudest tick at Tickfall, Louisiana."

Four days later Mr. Shirley Rouke sat beside the mahogany table in the office of Colonel Tom Gaits-

kill, president of the Tickfall bank, and told him of his plans.

"Do you know anything about negroes, Mr. Rouke?" Gaitskill inquired.

"Not a dang thing!" Rouke grinned. "Their faces and hands are black and I presume they are also black under their clothes, but I don't know. All of them seem to answer promptly to the name of George. The Pullman porters are accommodating everywhere except in Mississippi, which has an anti-tipping law. I spent a month in New Orleans about twenty years ago, but didn't get chummy with any smokes."

"Your education has been sadly neglected," Gaitskill laughed. "But you are now in a fair way to overcome its defects. Sir, you have my sincerest sympathy."

"If you mean you are sorry for me, I don't see any cause for your heart-break," Rouke declared. "This is a simple business proposition. I'll look around a little, get my locations, write my scenario, employ my actors, pay 'em a good salary, take my pictures and hike!"

"It sounds easy," Gaitskill remarked gravely. Then he laughed. Finally he asked: "Did you ever see a photograph of a negro?"

"Sure! I've seen Booker T.'s mug!"

"He don't count," Gaitskill said. "It's a long, long way to Tuskegee, and these niggers around here could not pronounce that word if they practiced for a week."

The door opened and a squat-legged, pot-bellied

negro entered, removing his hat. His head was bald except for a tuft of moss-like hair growing above each ear, making him look like a fat-faced mule wearing a blind bridle. His thick lips pouted like the lips of a fretted child.

"What's aching now, Vinegar?" Gaitskill asked.

"Marse Tom, 'bout dat left-handed screw driver dat you sont me out to borrer dis mawnin'; de blacksmif tole me dat he loant it to Sheriff Flournoy, an' de sheriff tole me dat Doc Moseley done borrered it, an' Doc Moseley tole me dat he had Hitch Diamond wuckin' wid it because Hitch already had such a powerful lef' hook, an' I hunted up Hitch an' Hitch tole me I wus a dam' ole fool. Hitch specify dat dar ain't no sech thing as a left-handed screw driver!"

Gaitskill bega'n to cough violently and ran to the window for fresh air, where he could also conceal his face from Vinegar Atts by turning his back.

To Mr. Rouke that cough sounded like a smothered laugh, but he had no interest in a screw driver and concentrated his attention on the negro.

Gaitskill had almost recovered from his fake cough when he chanced to turn his head and see Mr. Rouke. That brilliant New Yorker was gazing at Vinegar Atts with a scrutiny so intense, so penetrating that it seemed to go beneath the negro's skin and pierce to the very marrow of his bones; while Vinegar gazed back into the Irishman's blue orbs with the vacuous solemnity of a horse. That started Gaitskill in another fit of coughing.

Finally Gaitskill said:

"I'm sorry I put you to so much trouble, Vinegar. Here's a half dollar to pay you for your work."

"Wus you prankin' wid me, Marse Tom?" Vinegar asked, as he pocketed the silver.

"Oh, no," Gaitskill grinned. "How could I know there was no such thing as a left-handed screw driver?"

"Dat's so," Vinegar agreed. "Nobody cain't find out nothin' 'thout axin'."

"I'm glad you happened in just now, Vinegar," Gaitskill said, changing the subject. "This gentleman sitting here is Mr. Shirley Rouke of New York City."

"Glad to meet yo' 'quaintance," Vinegar mumbled.

Rouke rose and held out his hand.

Gaitskill watched Vinegar with a smile: a negro positively hates to shake hands with any white man who is not his personal friend.

Vinegar looked down at Rouke's hand, then reached out and caught hold of it about as a man would handle the tail of a vicious rat.

"Glad to meet you," Rouke murmured, to whom this comedy was hidden.

"Yes, suh, dat's right, suh!" Vinegar responded.

"Vinegar Atts is a preacher, Mr. Rouke," Gaitskill remarked. "He is the leader of the negro race in Tickfall. I suggest that you talk over your plans with him and engage him to help you."

"Thanks, Colonel," Rouke said. "And now, not to detain you longer from your business, I'll take a walk with Atts and we'll have a talk."

"My automobile is at your service," Gaitskill said, as he shook hands. "I'll be glad to help you in any way. Make yourself at home in this office."

When the door closed behind this oddly assorted pair, Gaitskill broke out in a loud laugh.

II

AN ART TO ART TALK

"Boss," Vinegar inquired, the moment they stepped out of the bank, "is you gwine converse me 'bout some kind of wuck?"

"Yes, I have a little proposition which——"

"Please, suh, less you an' me go somewheres an' set down," Vinegar pleaded in a tone which throbbed with fatigue. "Nothin' don't make me as tired as talkin' 'bout wuck."

Vinegar led him through the narrow, winding streets of the negro settlement known as Dirty-Six, and conducted him finally to the Shoofly church. Opening the door, he brought out two rickety chairs, placed them in the shade of a chinaberry tree, sighed audibly, and sat down. Rouke placed his chair against the trunk of the tree and leaned back.

"Now, boss, beller dem sad news to me easy!" Vinegar admonished. "Don't fergit it offen yo' mind dat my maw fotched me up meek an' mild an' de good Lawd called me to preach. A real, stiddy job of reg'lar wuck would shore bust my cornstitution down."

Being totally unaccustomed to negro whimsicali-

ties, Mr. Shirley Rouke listened to this without a smile. His cool, steady eyes gazed at Vinegar deliberately, appraisingly, captiously, and Vinegar felt the fountains of fun turn dry as dust within him. This man would not take any nigger foolishness.

Without knowing it, Rouke had made his task doubly hard by causing Vinegar to feel ill at ease.

"I'm a motion picture director and producer for the Gitagraft Company," Rouke began in a voice which clicked like the keys of a typewriter. "I want to produce an All-Negro picture, und'stand? I want you to help me get the actors and extras, help me to find my locations, give me the right steer on everything, and dope out everything I need to know about the blacks, see?"

There was one minute of perfect silence. Vinegar broke out in a profuse perspiration. He removed his hat, placed it on the ground, wiped the sweat off the top of his bald head by the simple process of rubbing the sleeve of his coat over it, and sighed like a bellows. Then he asked timidly:

"Boss, would you mind pourin' all dem buckshots back in de pouch? Dey rattled an' spluttered all aroun' me, but dey didn't hit nowhar."

"How's that? I don't get you!" Rouke snapped.

The two gazed at each other like glass-eyed china dogs, both devoid of comprehension. Then Vinegar wailed:

"Marse Tom hadn't oughter shoved me inter dis jam. Mebbe ef he'd tole me 'bout dis hisself, I might could ketch on!"

"I don't get you!" Rouke barked.

"Yes, suh, dat's right!" Vinegar assured him.

Rouke slapped the upper pocket of his fancy waistcoat, snatched out two fat cigars, and held them out to Vinegar Atts. Without knowing it, he had made an overwhelming hit!

Vinegar took a cigar, carefully removed the large purple and gold band, placed it on his little finger, held up his gorilla-like hand and gazed at the ornament as admiringly as a maiden views her engagement ring. Then he leaned back and puffed the smoke in a cloud around his head.

"Dis shore is a good stogie, boss," he remarked. "I's powerful sorry dar ain't no women folks aroun' to see me smoke it. It makes me feel a whole heap better. Whut did you say you done fer a livin'?"

"I make moving pictures," Rouke answered.

"Movin'—which?" Vinegar asked.

"Moving pictures," Rouke repeated in a sharp tone. "Didn't you ever see any movies?"

"Yes, suh, mebbe so, suh, when I wus a little shaver, 'way back befo' de war. But I ain't seem to rickoleck nothin' 'bout it."

"Aw, gosh!" Rouke snapped. "Are you kidding me?"

"Naw, suh, dunno, suh, 'spose not, suh."

The Gitagraft Company suffered an inestimable loss by not having a camera artist present at this interview to preserve the facial expressions of these two men as they sat glaring at each other. Finally a gleam of intelligence penetrated the armor-plated skull of Vinegar, and he said:

"Boss, it 'pears like you an' me don't sop gravy

outen de same dish. When you talks, nothin' don't specify; an' when I talks my argumint don't show wharin. Us is bofe jes' wuckin' our jaws widout chawin' no cud. Whut I axes you is dis: Does you sells pictures or does you takes pictures?"

"I takes pictures," Shirley grinned.

"Dar now!" Vinegar grinned back. "Now us is bofe lickin' offen de same spoon. You keep yo' mouf sot till I axes you anodder 'terrogation: Is dese here movin' pictures jes' de same as livin' pictures?"

"Yes—no—I suppose so," Rouke answered, wondering how he could explain to the negro without getting him all balled up again.

"Ef dat's so, den I understan's whut you signifies," Vinegar boomed. "A feller come to my chu'ch las' year an' he had somepin like dat. He had a Noer's Ark, an' de Chillum of Israel, an' a Daniel in de lions' pen—an' dat wus all pretty pious an' proper. But atter dat, he had whut he called a *Tablow Vevong* of livin' pictures, an' I didn't favor 'em much. He put some black little tight underclothes on me an' made me stand in a wash tub an' called me 'September Mawn.'"

"Aw, hell!" Shirley Rouke remarked. "That ain't it at all."

"Sorry, boss," Vinegar said in troubled tones. "I figgered dat us wus jes' 'bout to ketch on to each yuther."

"Don't you colored persons ever put on any plays?" Rouke inquired.

"Does you mean do us pull off any shows?" Vinegar asked.

"Yes."

"Suttinly, boss. Us gin a show las' week."

"That's good," Rouke declared. "Now a moving picture is simply a show, a play, all the parts taken an' acted by colored persons, and while they are playing we will take pictures of them. See?"

"I sees!"

"The actors won't have a thing to do with the pictures. They only play the parts which I teach them. Und'stand?"

"Ain't you gwine gib us no koodak shotsnaps of ourse'ves?" Vinegar demanded in a disappointed tone.

"Oh, sure!" Rouke assented in an acidulous voice. "Any dang little thing to please. Do you think you could round me up a bunch of colored people who would like to act in a show?"

"Git 'em?" Vinegar bellowed. "Boss, my job is gwine be to keep 'em away! When de news gits aroun' dat eve'y nigger gits a free picture of hisse'f an' a chance to speak a piece on de flatform—Mister Man, I tells you honest—us better keep dis a secret! You'll wear yo' koodak plum' out takin' nigger pictures!"

"All right!" Rouke agreed. "Keep it quiet. Don't tell anybody except those you want in the play. See? Now let's discuss terms."

"Cuss—which?"

"Talk money!" Rouke barked.

Vinegar's face fell.

"I thought de pictures wus free!" he protested.

"Oh, I don't mean that!" Rouke grated through

his teeth. "Listen! I want to know how much you will charge me to get the actors for the play and help me stage it. Get that?"

"I ketch on!" Vinegar beamed. "You wants to make a trade. Well, suh, when Marse Tom wants me to git him some plantation hands, he pays me one dollar apiece per each nigger an' one dollar per day extry fer knowin' whar dey is at an' how to argufy 'em loose from de yuther planters."

"I'll pay you two dollars for every negro I employ in the play and five dollars a week for wages. When I see the actors, I'll arrange rates with them. Is that all right?"

"Yes, suh, dat shore sounds like free charity," Vinegar agreed.

"What about a contract?" Rouke asked.

"A which?"

"A contract—a writing—write up the agreement!" Rouke explained.

"You means a obscribe!" Vinegar said. "Naw, suh, 'tain't wuth writin' up. Niggers don't favor obscribes. Us gits in lawsuits wid de cotehouse when us scratches on paper. Ef you pays us eve'y day, us niggers will wuck. Ef de pay stops, restin' time is done come."

"Very good!" Rouke said, as he rose from his chair. "Go out now and get all the niggers who have ever acted in a show. Tell them to meet me here tomorrow morning at nine o'clock. I'll see you then. So long!"

He turned and walked back toward the village of Tickfall.

Vinegar watched him until he disappeared from view; then he said:

"Dat's a nice white man, but more'n half de time his mouf don't understan' his mind. Eve'y time I esplained to him whut he wus tryin' to say, he specify dat wusn't it!"

Rouke returned to his hotel, opened the door to his room, and found the chair by his typewriter preempted by Peter Pellet.

"What's the grouch, Pete?" Rouke demanded. "You got a pout on your mug like a camel. I bet you can't walk without stepping on your lip."

"Oh, sugar, Shirley," Peter mourned. "I just came in to tell you what a hellarious town this Tickfall is. During the day the men just sit in front of the stores and chew tobacco and kid the niggers. If a dog-fight happens the town gets so excited the doctors are called out to quiet their nerves. At night the whole bunch goes home and goes to bed. If it ain't so, you may hang my body on a sour apple tree. I asked one of 'em what they did on Sunday and he said they went to church! What do you know about that? Two days of dissipation have dragged me down, Shirley—I'm a faint and feeble frazzle! Fan me with a brick!"

"Aw, can that!" Rouke growled. "Have you been out finding those locations I told you about?"

"You bet!" Peter answered, and now his tone changed to admiration. "These swamps are the real thing, Shirley. I saw a jungle so thick that a raccoon could not crawl through it without scraping all the hair off of his tail. I saw a lake that's got no

bottom, one side of it hot water and the other cold. I saw mosquitoes as big as a daddy longlegs—felt 'em, too; when they bite they feel like a red-hot poker and when you slap 'em you are a murderer with a raw and bleeding corpse upon your hands!

"I saw a swamp rattlesnake five feet long, big around as my leg, full of fight as Jess Willard or Jesse James, and hungry enough to manifest a carnivorous desire for my acquaintance, but I moved the free lunch about forty feet away before he got a bite. I found a place where you could stick a pole down in the swamp mud, pull it out all dripping with water, and light it like a torch—the mud is so full of gas. I——"

"Get out of here!" Rouke said. "Order that reel from New Orleans to come up to-night and fix it up with the movie man so we can show it to-morrow morning!"

Left alone with his typewriter, Rouke slipped a sheet of paper in the machine and wrote:

THE JEWEL OF THE JUNGLE

"Gee," he grinned, as he began his scenario, "that's an utterly wretched title, I don't think!"

III

THE MOVING PICTURE WRITES

When Rouke entered the Shoofly church next morning, he found the pulpit chair occupied by the Reverend Vinegar Atts, while forty of his parishion-

ers sat in mute and reverent attitude in the pews.

Rouke stood for a moment in the dusty, smelly, dilapidated building, gazed at the rude benches scrawled with names and dates and letters, and at the windows whose broken panes had been mended by different colored glass, and his artistic soul got a cold chill. The place looked like a morgue and the occupants reminded him of stiffs.

"Bring your congregation out in front, Atts!" he called. "I want to see 'em in the sunlight!"

Standing in the churchyard, Rouke got his first look at some of our old acquaintances: Skeeter Butts, small, wiry, dressy, his face saddle-colored, his hair close-cropped with the part in the middle made by a razor, his shirt-collar so high that he resembled a sorrel mule looking over a whitewashed fence; Figger Bush, with his kinky wool, his ratlike eyes, and his shoe-brush mustache; Hitch Diamond, massive, solid, built like a rock quarry; and a dozen more men and a score of women filed out behind them and stood about the steps of the church.

Skeeter Butts suddenly left his place, passed around to the other end of the group, and stood close beside a certain girl.

Rouke, watching him, found in that moment the bright particular gem for the Jewel of the Jungle.

Lalla Cordona was well worth looking at.

She stood among the others as distinct as a polished diamond lying in a slag-heap, slim and straight as a javelin, graceful as a stalk of waving corn, the features of her coal-black face as clear-cut as a cameo, her flexible, expressive lips curling smilingly over

absolutely flawless teeth—she was as exquisite as a statue carved in ebony by the hands of Beauty and Grace.

But over all and through all there poured the flame, the personal magnetism of the girl, that unanalyzable something which makes the perfect moving picture type—the fire, the soul, which glows in the eyes, quivers in the cheek, distends the nostrils, curls the lip, or when the lip is still, reposes there, making the lip palpitant with its presence.

As for Skeeter Butts, love had made him a fool. No beggar ever groveled before a princess at the distribution of alms, no dog ever fawned before his mistress, as Skeeter acted in the presence of this ebon divinity.

"Skeeter's done kotch it at las'," Hitch Diamond grinned, as he watched the infatuated barkeeper. "He acts as proud as a monkey wid a tin tail, an' as shy as a houn' pup whut's tumbled in a bucket of tar!"

"She's sot up shiny and purty jes' like a autermobile, ain't she?" Figger Bush remarked in admiring tones.

"Huh," Hitch Diamond grinned, "eve'y woman is sot up jes' like a autermobile. A autermobile costs money to git it, an' it costs money to keep it, an' when it takes a notion to stop nothin' cain't make it go, an' when somepin gits de matter wid it, not even Gawd knows whut de trouble am. Ain't dat jes' like a woman?"

This edifying dissertation was terminated by the stentorian voice of Vinegar Atts:

"Eve'ybody listen to me: dis here white gen'leman is named Mr. Rouke. He specify dat he gits up shows an' takes koodaks fer a livin'. He wants us niggers to he'p him. Eve'ybody gits a free picture. Eve'ybody is 'lowed to speak a piece on de platform. Eve'ybody gits a few loose change fer deir time an' wuck. I now resigns in Mr. Rouke's favor!"

Vinegar sat down on the church steps and fanned himself with his hat.

"I want to teach you folks to play a drama entitled *The Jewel of the Jungle*, Rouke announced in crisp tones.

"Whut is a draymer?" Figger Bush wanted to know.

"It's a tragedy," Rouke informed him. "Not a funny play, but a show full of love and fighting, and brave men and women."

"Don't us be allowed to bust no jokes in dis here draymer?" Vinegar Atts wanted to know.

"No!" Rouke told him. "You won't have to say a word. You don't talk. You act!"

"Huh!" Skeeter Butts proclaimed. "You cain't git up no lock-jaw play wid niggers. Ef a nigger cain't whistle and sing and pat his foots, he'd druther be dead!"

"You don't understand," Rouke said sharply. "This is a motion picture play. Didn't any of you folks ever see a movie show?"

"Naw, suh!" came a chorus of voices.

"All right!" Rouke answered. "Follow me and I'll take you down to the theater and show you one!"

The negroes fell in line, and Rouke led them

through the mazes of Dirty-Six, up the main streets of Tickfall and into the little theater.

Peter Pellet was perched aloft, having made all arrangements with the owner of the house for this exhibition.

The negroes seated themselves close to the front, a circle of light flashed upon the screen, a slight whirring sound came from the projection room and a title fluttered before them:

THE DANCE OF DEATH

Then for twenty minutes the negroes were transported to a tropic island in the South Pacific Ocean.

They beheld a bamboo village, the little naked children playing in front of the huts, the dogs lying in the sun or slinking among the cooking-pots, the men and women wearing the rude, barbaric garments of the tribe, their legs and shoulders bare.

They witnessed the preparation for a great feast, the camp filling up with wild, cruel savages, both men and women.

Then the village princess danced before them, a frenzied whirl of bare arms and bare limbs, while a band of musicians beat upon rude instruments whose melody they could not hear.

They beheld a white man appear upon this scene, peep at the dancing princess, through the interstices of the jungle, fall in love with her infatuating grace and beauty, and later seek her out in her bamboo hut.

Betrayed by her white lover, the Black Swan sought revenge.

the village, burned the bamb

But the Black Swan had
and the negroes watched her w
as she trailed the rescue party
narrow defile in the mountai
mountain side and stood, at la
the sky, as graceful as the bird
looking down upon the posse
She called to her faithless lo
through his body, then turned
deer from rock to rock.

With tense bodies and ach
watched the flight of the girl
posse until the girl was corne
on a high, sharp crag, overlool

Then as the rifle bullets
splashed against the rock at he
bird prepared for flight, leaped
pice, curved like an arrow in it
head foremost into the rollin

little gal dived so fur she'll stick head down in de mud in de bottom of dat puddle like a cypress stump!"

"Dat white man shore got his'n," Vinegar remarked. "'Tain't no way fer a white man to do—hangin' aroun' nigger cabins like dat!"

The electric light flashed up, and Mr. Rouke, stepped to the front.

"Now, folks," he began, "you understand what a moving picture play is. There is no talking. The people act. I have a fine act for all of you to take part in, and I want you to meet me at the Shoofly church this afternoon at one o'clock. That's all now!"

The negroes filed out in silence and scattered to different parts of the town.

Rouke and Pellet went to the hotel for lunch, and at the time appointed walked out to the church.

There was not a negro on the place. They waited for three hours and not one appeared, not even Vinegar Atts.

They began a search for Atts, and found him whitewashing a fence for Colonel Tom Gaitskill.

"What's the matter, Atts? Why didn't you niggers show up?"

Vinegar wiped the splashes of whitewash off of his black face and answered:

"Dey said dey didn't want to come, boss."

"Who said?"

"All of 'em, excusin' dat little gal named Lalla Cordona, whut says she visitin' here from N'Awleens. She wus game fer it, but nobody else wouldn't mess wid it no more!"

Yes, sun 'tis! Dat's wut de
down on de wall at dat little t

"Yes, I know, but you don't
are all those people?"

"Dey's all gone out to Lak
boss. I'se gwine out as soon as
washed. A new coon done come
he was de beau of dat Lalla C
fotch her a red ruben necklace a
I guess dat's so. He hired m
dar."

"I'll go out there and bring t
said.

"'Twon't do no good, boss. I
dem mens and womens say dey
Dey got conscience scruples."

"What's the trouble?"

Vinegar scratched his head and
his words with care:

"Well, suh, dey is all agreed d

gust and exasperation to which Rouke gave vocal utterance.

Vinegar Atts, appalled to the core of his ecclesiastical soul by this thunderous fulmination of anathema, picked up his whitewash bucket and slunk away.

Turning a distant corner, he stopped and peeped behind him.

"Lawdymussy!" he sighed. "Dat yuther man is done j'ined in now! Dem white mens is shore tellin' Gawd all about us niggers!"

Ten minutes later, Rouke, having relieved his mind, looked up and grinned at Pellet.

"Peter," he said in a quiet voice, "would you mind leading me to the private office of Colonel Tom Gaitskill in the Tickfall bank? Since I've been associating with the negro inhabitants of this village, I don't believe I have sense enough to find that office."

IV

STUNT STUFF!

Five personages arrived at the fishing camp on Lake Basteneau early the next morning.

First came Rev. Vinegar Atts and Miss Cordona's New Orleans lover, the latter wearing clothes of the newest model and a slick smile of the most recent duplicity—a tall, slim, smooth-faced negro of the typical Ethiopian features and the air of a race-track tout.

Next came Miss Lalla Cordona in a hired buggy, as dressy as a cheap Christmas doll, radiant with smiles and quivering with vivacity and vital magnetism.

Dar now! Vinegar Atts b
a white man shows up at a nigg
lose deir religion right away. N
nobody whoops 'Hallelujah,' an
An' when white mens shows u
picnic—boof! de fun is done all
dem white men ain't real pious

Skeeter Butts beat the New
foot race to Miss Cordona's bu
and engaged her in a rapid-fire c
hitched her horse to a tree.

"Dem jewelry you got on
squinchin' to de eyes, Laller," he
ing tones.

"Yes, suh," Lalla remarked w
as she preened herself before h
excruciating gaud and gewgaw
the ten-cent store. "De man wh
me dat ev'y piece was *rolled* gold-
de purest kind of gold whut is!"

Impelled by curiosity, the other negroes had gathered around, and the new coon saw a good opportunity to show off.

"Boss," hé inquired of Mr. Rouke, "is you-alls movin' picture mens?"

"Yes."

"Is you gwine take pictures of dis here lake?"

"Yes," Rouke replied, as he busied himself setting up his machine.

The darky took off his hat, rubbed his head, hesitated a moment, then said in a pleading voice:

"Please, suh, boss, would you wish to take a picture of me doin' some kind of stunts? I used to wuck in de movies an' I likes it."

"Who? You?" Rouke snapped, gazing at the negro with incredulous eyes. "What did you do in the studio?"

"I wucked fer a feller whut took de pictures. He lemme tote his extry films, and lemme hold his hat, an' sometimes he gimme a board wid a number on it, an' lemme stan' in front of de picture-box while he turned de crank an' tuck my tintype."

Shirley Rouke saw that this speech had made an impression upon the negroes gathered around. He hesitated a moment, then said:

"What's your name?"

"Dey calls me Sour Sudds."

"All right, Sudds. You seem to have had considerable experience as a movie actor. Now if you can get some of these other people to get in it with you, I think I will take a picture of you all."

"Come on, niggers!" Sudds bellowed in delighted

party was eager to get into th

"Is you gwine show us how
inquired.

"Certainly," Rouke answere

While Peter Pellet was adju
placing his side lines, Rouke w
camp and brought out a small
which he placed in front of the

"That won't do, Pete!" he
some lines which Pete had drawn
better get your cord and stretch
like you do in the studio. Th
any attention to a mark on the

Rouke hastened to the auto
out a tray, two glasses, and a b
while Pellet readjusted his lines.

Then Vinegar Atts put in.

"Mister Rouke, I's gwine be d
show because you an' me done n
effecks."

The three actors were conducted to the front of the camera and Rouke gave his directions:

"Lalla, you and Sour Sudds sit down in the chairs beside that little table. Sour, you make love to the girl with all your might. Hold her hand, make goo-goo eyes, act like you loved her more than any other woman in the world——"

"Lemme do dat!" Skeeter Butts broke in.

Had there been a proneness to apoplexy in the Rouke family, Shirley would now be dead. As it was, Skeeter Butts never knew how near his interruption had brought him to a sudden and violent death. It is safe to say that nothing like that had ever happened before in the moving picture world.

"Buck up, Rouke!" Pellet spoke sharply. "Don't scatter the beans!"

Rouke swallowed four times, then spoke in a voice as gentle as the tones of a butcher conducting some Mary's little lamb into the slaughterhouse after the said lamb had butted him down:

"No, Skeeter. I'll tell you what to do in a minute. I might also tell you where to go and some other things, but duty restrains my inclination."

Then he turned to Figger Bush:

"Now, Figger, listen: when I give the word, you come over here and get this tray with the glasses and the wine bottle and bring it in and set it on the table between Lalla and Sudds. Then retire. Get me?"

"Yes, suh. I fotch it in an' git out!"

"Sudds, you register love, infatuation—aw, I said that before! Lalla, you register maiden modesty, timidity, growing love. Now, Skeeter Butts, when

I give the word you enter, walk up to the table where Sudds and Lalla are sitting, register jealousy, anger, desire for revenge; then catch Sour Sudds by the shoulder, lift him out of the chair, and take the seat yourself. Sudds, you walk off. Lalla, you look after him and register love."

The actors moved to their places and Rouke gave the command:

"Now—ready—rehearse!"

The rehearsal was perfect. Rouke and Pellet were delighted.

"Now we are ready to take the picture!" Rouke exclaimed. "All of you act just like you did before!"

Then he gave the command which in the moving picture world starts the camera crank to turning:

"Ready—Action—Go!"

Thereupon, Reverend Vinegar Atts walked out and sat down on the table between Lalla and Sudds.

"Hol' on, dar!" he bellowed, shaking his finger at the camera. "Don't I git my picture took, too? You an' me made a trade——"

"Cut!" Rouke snapped, which is the technical word of command to the camera artist to stop the picture.

"Get away from there, you fat fool! What you cut across the front for and spoil the picture? Get out!"

Rouke's tone and gestures were so threatening that Vinegar jumped ten feet, tripped over a side line and fell on his head.

"Aw, the devil!" Pellet snarled savagely. "Now I got to set up that line again!"

He stooped and clawed around on the ground to find a rock to throw, but rocks are as scarce as ice-cream cones in a Louisiana swamp.

"Huh!" Vinegar grunted as he moved farther and farther away from the irate white men. "Dem white gen'lemens is done poured me back in de jug!"

"Now, we'll start again!" Rouke proclaimed. "Ready, action, go!"

Lalla and Sour Sudds began their love play, the camera clicking off their perfect action.

"Now, Figger!" Rouke bawled. "Come on! Pick up the tray and walk to the table!"

Figger came on. And Rouke nearly threw a fit.

Seizing the tray in both hands, Figger held it in front of him in a strained, awkward manner; he side-stepped into the focus of the camera, set his eyes straight at the lens where the country photographers used to tell us the "little bird" could be seen, and marched face-on to the table; he set the waiter down without changing his full-face position toward the camera, backed ten feet, side-stepped out of the focus, then squealed and kicked up his heels much as a mule colt would act when turned into a pasture!

"My—good—gosh!" Shirley Rouke shrieked. That is to say, this is the only remark he made which the law would permit of publication. "What did you mean by that stunt?"

"I wus havin' my picture took, boss," Figger informed him in frightened tones, for Figger was appalled by the language he had heard.

"But—but—why didn't you act natural?" Rouke spluttered.

"Dat ain't no way to do, boss," Figger declared. "When us niggers gits our tintypes koodaked us is got to show bofe foots, bofe hands, bofe eyes, and bofe ears. We don't take no sideways picture. Ef us don't show all of ourse'ves, de niggers will figger dat one eye done got gouged out, or one ear done been cut off. Yes, suh, dat's right."

"Shore!" a chorus of negro voices answered. "Us ain't gwine hab our pictures took no way but straight on!"

In hopeless impotence, Shirley Rouke turned to Peter Pellet for aid and comfort, and beheld that artist doubled up, helpless with laughter.

"What's the matter with you, you blue-mass pill?" Rouke bawled.

"Oh, lordy, Roukey," Peter howled. "That's the funniest stunt ever pulled before a camera! It'll get a laugh from Broadway to the Chinese Yellow Sea. Buck up, and go on with the show!"

Rouke felt greatly mollified.

"All right! Get ready, now! Pour the wine in those glasses, Sudds! Ready! Action! Go!"

The steady click of the camera amid a breathless silence; then Rouke's command:

"Come on, Skeeter! Come on!"

Skeeter came on!

He bounced into the picture with a perfect imitation of a she-bear approaching a man who was holding her squealing cub by the ear. Sour had been too realistic in his acting, and Skeeter was jealous. He grabbed Sudds by the nose, shook him as a dog shakes a rat, grabbed the wine bottle and broke it over Sour's

head, then administered a punch on the jaw which sent Sudds reeling out of his chair to the ground.

Then Sudds came back. Seizing Skeeter by the nape of the neck, he pounded his head against the table until it rattled like a snare drum. Skeeter twisted and squealed until he managed to land a mighty kick in the pit of Sour's stomach, then he sprang up, grabbed a chair and proceeded to use it as a club.

Sour seized the little deal-table, poised it above his head like a shield, and pranced around, receiving Skeeter's frenzied blows on the top of the table instead of the top of his head.

Lalla Cordona backed slowly away from the fray, her shapely, beautiful hands clasped over her heaving breast, her breath coming in quick gasps, her face expressing emotions which alternated between fear and hope and horror and despair.

Then she swept forward with a grace and power simply majestic in its action, held out her hands to the furious men and spoke one word:

"Please!"

The negroes, whose view of the fight had been obscured by the camera and the bodies of Rouke and Pellet, started around them toward the front, where they could see.

"Keep out of the picture!" Rouke screamed. "I'll kill the first nigger that moves!"

Skeeter and Sudds ceased their combat, dropped their weapons of war, and each held out his hands to Lalla Cordona, pleading, beseeching, each asking her approval of the part he had taken in the fray.

The girl stood for a moment looking from one to the other, hesitant, indignant.

"Don't pay no mind to dat Sudds, Missy!" Skeeter pleaded. "His name proves dat he ain't nothin' but dirty dishwater, an' his maw wus a cheap washlady. Come along wid me, an' be my frien'! I loves you mo' dan he do!"

"You niggers hike!" Lalla spoke.

Her voice bit into their souls like acid, and the men turned and started slowly away.

The girl stood looking after them a moment, then she ran to the tree where her horse was standing hitched.

Skeeter and Sudds sprang after her.

"Come back, Miss Laller!" they bawled in a duet. "Us'll be real nice gen'lemens!"

"No!" she said sharply, as she untied her horse and sprang into the buggy. "I done had enough rough-housin' to last me a long time. I's gwine back to Tickfall!"

Drenched with perspiration, his face as red as blood, Shirley Rouke mopped the sweat from his forehead and gazed inquiringly at Peter Pellet.

Peter was panting like a hot dog, but his eyes blazed in triumph.

"I got it all, Roukey!" he said.

V

READY—ACTION—GO!

Shirley Rouke and Peter Pellet sat upon the sun-slashed porch of the Tickfall hotel smoking their after-breakfast cigars.

The day was as clear and beautiful and buoyant as a soap bubble, and the Gulf breeze, sweeping across one hundred miles of forest, tasted salt upon their lips, and made music upon the fluted tree tops.

Rev. Vinegar Atts and Sour Sudds ploughed across the sandy street, and stepped upon the porch, where the men reclined in their chairs in lazy enjoyment of the hour.

"Mr. Rouke," Vinegar began, "when is us gwine start takin' our koodaks?"

"You niggers ain't got good sense," Rouke replied indifferently. "I tried to take the pictures yesterday, and you coons rough-housed and made a pack of dang monkeys out of yourselves."

"Yes, suh, dat's so," Vinegar acquiesced. "But I done de best I could. Dem niggers ain't edgecated up to koodaks yit."

"I guess not," Shirley drawled.

"Me an' Brudder Sudds is been talkin' about it," Vinegar went on, "an' Sudds specify dat he don't think he had a fair show. He wants to hab one mo' try-on."

"Dat's right!" Sudds chimed in.

"What do you folks want to do?" Shirley asked curiously.

"Sudds, he specify dat he figgers dat a make-b'lieve weddin' betwix' him an' dat N'Awleens gal would be jes' de right do," Vinegar proposed.

"Who'll marry 'em?" Rouke asked, watching the smoke curl up from the end of his cigar.

"Me!" Vinegar proclaimed in an explosive tone. "Dat is my real bizzness. I marrifies all de niggers."

got no whiskers an' my head is l
to hide me."

"All right," Rouke laughed.
together, and I'll try it again.
get used to the camera after a
on my play. Where is that
Lulu——"

"Laller?" Vinegar corrected h
Sheriff John Flournoy. I'll git

"Get busy, then," Rouke snap
ning to work like a dynamo. '
together at the Shoofly church
Tell that Lulu—Laller, to dress h
ding. Hunt up that Skoot Butts,
ready to act the part of the reje
certainly a dandy in that rôle y
that Diamond Hitch, and tell h
father of Lalla, and give her aw
That's all!"

Vinegar ki th ha—

The two delighted darkies snatched the money, crammed it into their pockets, and went stamping down the steps.

At the corner, Sour Sudds said:

"Elder, you go hunt up dem niggers Mr. Rouke tole you 'bout, an' I'll rack over to de cotehouse an' git dem license!"

"Dat's right," Vinegar boomed. "Dat white man done plum' fergot dem cotehouse papers, an' dis is gwine be a real cotehouse wedding. I fetches 'em off fine, Sudds. You oughter see me git active in a mattermony pufformunce!"

The negroes separated, and three hours later, the wedding party had assembled at the Shoofly church, and Rouke and Pellet arrived, each with a camera.

Peter Pellet got his location, adjusted his machine, fixed his side lines and announced himself in readiness.

Rouke studied his characters, then began his instructions:

"Elder Atts, you and Sour Sudds are to come into the picture together and await the arrival of the bride. Lalla Cordona comes in on the arm of Diamond Hitch. All the rest of you folks bunch up together behind the wedding party. Skeeter Butts, you establish yourself—stand out in front of the invited guests, and register pain because you have lost this beautiful bride. Now—ready—rehearse!"

Then Sour Sudds suddenly bethought himself, fumbled in his pocket, trotted into the church and came out with a little square-topped writing table

and a chair, and placed them in full view of the camera.

"What the devil—" Rouke began to splutter like the fuse of a cannon-cracker about to explode.

"Dis here table is fer de witnesses to sign de license, boss," Sudds explained, as he drew a paper out of his pocket, spread it out, and then from the same capacious pocket brought forth a pen and a bottle of ink. "Sheriff John Flournoy gimme dis paper an' I come mighty nigh fergettin' it! He didn't charge me nothin' fer dis license, neither."

"I see!" Rouke exclaimed. "Set that table back a little—that's it! Now you wedding guests come in and stand behind that table—that's right! Now ready—rehearse!"

The rehearsal was perfect.

"That's fine!" Rouke exclaimed.

"Naw, suh, 'tain't!" Sour Sudds growled. "Don't de preacher be allowed to say no words?"

"Sure!" Rouke told him, "but it is not necessary in a rehearsal!"

"Now, I tells you dis:" Sour Sudds responded in belligerent tones, "when de picture is took ef Elder Atts ain't 'lowed to say all de words jes' like dis wus a real weddin', I ain't gwine hab nothin' to do wid it!"

"He'll say 'em all right, Sour," Rouke assured him. "Keep your shirt on—don't disarrange your linen! Now we're ready for the picture! Vinegar, you marry these people just like you would in a church at a sure-enough wedding. Ready—action—go!"

Sour Sudds laid his hand upon the elbow of Rev-

erend Vinegar Atts and the two marched into the picture. Sudds was trembling all over and his lips twitched with nervousness so great that he constantly strove to wipe the emotion away by scraping the back of his hand across his mouth.

The wedding guests moved into the picture, taking their locations behind the little writing table, and Skeeter Butts established himself in full view, his battered, swollen face—a result of the fracas at the fishing camp the day before—successfully "registering" all the emotions of pain, chagrin, anger, and sorrow at his loss of the beautiful bride.

Hitch Diamond came into the picture with the bride on his arm—or rather, by the arm. Hitch was regal in his walk and manner, and his widespread, grinning mouth demonstrated beyond a doubt that he was delighted to give the bride away; while Lalla Cordona, shy, drooping, taking embarrassed glances from side to side, sometimes giving vent to an insane snicker, was a perfect imitation of the real thing in dusky brides.

She wore the proverbial bridal veil, wore it loosely, sloppily, resembling a wet dishrag thrown over the top of a post. Her bridal dress was popped open in the back where the buttons had burst, the lace at the bottom of her skirt had been torn by her walk to the church through the weeds.

That dress had evidently been, at one time, some young lady's evening gown, and the glossy black of Lalla's bare shoulders and arms in the glare of the noonday sun was not only startling—it was shocking. Short white kid gloves covered the damsel's hands,

which she kept folded in maidenly modesty across her breast.

Hitch held her by the arm with the air of a policeman conducting a prisoner to the lock-up, and when he surrendered her to Sour Sudds, Sour grabbed her elbow in the same official and authoritative manner.

"Dear-ly be-lub-bed!" Vinegar Atts bawled in a voice which could be heard a mile, and whining his words with a peculiar, sing-song intonation which no other people on earth can imitate:

"Dear-ly be-lub-bed, we am gathered togedder in de sight of Gawd an' de 'socheation of dese witness to hitch togedder dis here man an' dis here woman in de holy bonduce of mattermony, which am a powerful good thing but ain't by nobody to be tuck up wid sudden-like, but atter prayerful study on de wharfore an' de outcome. Ef ary one of you niggers knows a good cause why not dey should be married, bawl out right now, or forever—hol'—yo'—peace!"

Skeeter Butts moved uneasily, opened his mouth to speak, then muttered in a low tone:

"I s'pose dis is all a play-like, but it shore looks nachelly like de plum' real thing to me!"

After an impressive pause, Vinegar continued, addressing his remarks to the principals:

"Ef ary one of you two niggers knows any jus' an' lawful an' resomble cause whyfo' you shouldn't git married bawl it out right now, or else forever—hereinafter—hencefo'th—hol'—yo'—peace!"

No impediment being alleged, Vinegar Atts glared at Sour Sudds and howled:

"Sour, is you gwine take dis woman to be yo' reg'-

lar cotehouse wife; is you gwine buy her vittles, chop her stove wood, pack her water, tote her washings to an' fro from de white folks' house, an' excusin' all yuther female womans, hang only onto her, so long as you bofe lives, so—he'p—you—Gawd, hope you may die?"

"I is!" Sour Sudds replied.

"Laller, is you gwine take dis man to be you' reg'lar cotehouse husbunt; is you gwine cook his grub, patch his britches, clean up atter him, keep him in chawin' terbaccer, an' excusin' all yuther men's take in washin' only fer him, an' stick only to him so long as you bofe lives togedder, so—he'p—you—Gawd?"

"I'm are!" Lalla snickered.

"J'ine yo' right hands!" Vinegar bellowed. "Let us pray!"

There was a moment's silence, then, in a tone which throbbed with indignation and rebuke, Atts said to Sour and Lalla:

"You two niggers shet yo' eyes! You got to shet yo' eyes to pray!"

"De Good Book say, 'Watch an' pray,'" Sour protested.

Vinegar glowered at them until they shut their eyes; having satisfied himself that they would observe the proprieties during his petition, he howled:

"Oh, Lawdymussy! Pity dese here two people whut is done united deir lives an' deir forchines. Don't let 'em got no deevo'ce, even if dey wants it *bad!* An' I shore hopes dar won't be no quollin' or fussin' or fightin'. Amen!"

"O Lord!" Peter Pellet whispered in imitation of

Vinegar, as he slowly turned the crank of the camera. He spoke only loud enough for Rouke to hear: "O Lord, deliver me henceforth and forever from such a film hog as this big fat slob of a preacher!"

"March over an' sign de obscribe!" Vinegar Atts bellowed, waving his hand toward the little writing table. "Yes make yo' mark, niggers! I'll tell de clerk whose marks dey am, an' he'll write down de names!"

When the last scribe had straightened up from the table and laid down the pen Sour Sudds snatched up the license, walked over and waved it in the face of Lalla Cordona, and in a voice which rang with triumph he exclaimed:

"Now, you slick little nigger gal! I fit an' bled an' died fer you at de fish camp yistiddy, an' you throwed me down flat—but I got you jes' de same! Dis paper is a real, reg'lar license from de cotehouse, Vinegar Atts is done said de words, de obscribe is done been signed, an' dat picture man is got a tintype of de whole weddin'! I got you! You is my lawful cotehouse wife!"

With a low, gurgling cry which ended in a scream, Lalla Cordona staggered backward, tottered as if about to fall, stumbled with pain-stricken face toward the two men standing by the clicking camera, then covered her face with her hands and sank, sobbing, to the ground.

There was a moment of intense silence while the surprising trick sank into the dull minds of the negroes.

Then Skeeter Butts screamed like a maniac and

hurled himself at Sour Sudds. The two men went down under the mighty impact, and Sour dropped the license from his hand. When they arose, Sour was struggling for his life to wrest an automatic pistol from the hands of Skeeter, while the little barkeeper, absolutely insane with fury, was fighting murderously to free the weapon and to kill.

In the midst of the struggle the hand of one of the fighters touched the trigger while the weapon was poised in the air. There were ten shots and the dangerous gun was empty!

Screaming with baffled rage, Skeeter gouged and fought and bit, but Sour was cooler and stronger, and slowly forced Skeeter back, until he had him pressed against the little writing table. In a moment Skeeter's back would have been broken.

"Hey, dar!" Hitch Diamond bawled. "Let dat little coon alone!"

The whole mass of negroes made a forward movement toward Sudds, and the darky saw that they would tear him to pieces. Releasing Skeeter, he jumped to one side, sought for some place of flight, then ran into the Shoofly church.

With a howl like a wolf-pack the mob rushed into the church after him.

Shirley Rouke seized his extra camera, ran behind the church and set it in position just as the mob came pouring out of the rear door.

Sour was aiming for the deep woods in the rear of the church, but as he started for them he confronted Skeeter with his automatic pistol. Sour had no means of knowing whether Skeeter had reloaded his gun, so

he ducked and started at full speed around the church with the mob in hot pursuit.

He dived into the church through the front door again, leaped out of a side window and started for the woods. But the mob split into two parts in the church, some of them going out of the rear door and some out of the front, and they met half-way around the Shoofly church with Sour Sudds in the middle.

Struggling, panting, fighting, finally screaming for help, Sour plunged and kicked and bit and scratched, working his way around to the front of the church again.

And there stood Lalla Cordona, her shapely hands clutched across her heaving bosom, watching the fray.

"He'p, Laller, fer Gawd's sake! Dey'll kill me!" Sour shrieked, with arms outstretched toward her.

It was his last word.

He went down in the whirlpool of spinning arms and legs while the mob snarled like wild hogs and tore at his prostrate body.

The sight sickened the girl and she turned away with face agonized, horror-stricken. Then the wretched negro's prayerful plea for help galvanized her into action.

By the side of the church there was a piece of scantling about the size and length of a baseball bat. Lalla picked it up and waded into that mob like an Amazon.

Biff! the scantling struck a head and the owner of the head ceased operations and sank heavily to the ground. Biff! Biff! Biff! Like Father Time with his

scythe, Lalla mowed the men down, or made such a deep impression on their minds that they were glad to retire.

At last she worked her way down to where poor Sour Sudds lay. But he did not lie there very long. Recalling his duplicity and deceit with reference to the marriage ceremony, and appalled at the dexterity with which Lalla handled her club, he rose from that spot, broke the world record for a hundred yard dash, and disappeared in the woods, still running.

Tickfall saw him no more.

Lalla turned, walked across the grass to where the marriage license lay upon the ground and picked it up.

She glanced at it, laughed, then carried it up close to the camera and held it so Rouke and Pellet could see it, and the all-seeing eye of the clicking machine might record it on the film.

It was a legal document issued by the City of New Orleans, Parish of Orleans, State of Louisiana.

It was signed and sealed by John Flournoy, Sheriff of Tickfall Parish, and an incorrigible practical joker.

It was a Dog License!

VI

"CUT!"

Three days later, Peter Pellet entered the Tickfall bank and found Colonel Tom Gaitskill and Sheriff John Flournoy sitting beside a desk smoking and chatting.

"Good!" Peter exclaimed. "I am sent to find

both of you gentlemen. Mr. Shirley Rouke invites you down to the theater to watch a try-out of our new picture. It's local stuff, you know, and he wants home criticism."

"We'll come!" Gaitskill exclaimed.

Sitting within the little theater, the two men witnessed upon the screen one of the rarest exhibitions in the world of the skill and ingenuity of a motion picture director and producer—an exhibition which caused the Gitagraft Company to make an amazing increase in Shirley Rouke's salary and which caused the world to add an astounding laudation to his already great fame as an artist.

The picture was perfect in plot and execution, full of love, fighting, tragedy, humor, and the two great scenes were the episodes we have described at the fish camp and the wedding at the Shoofly church.

Through the picture there ran rare scenes of the Louisiana jungle with the bear and deer in their native haunts, the wild hogs of the Gaitskill hog-camp, the deep, still forests with their wide, cool lanes, the sluggish bayous winding amid rank vegetation.

Two characters moved through the story, holding the thread of the plot—Lalla Cordona and Sour Sudds, and their acting was perfect.

When the picture ended, the men were voluble in their expressions of approbation.

Mr. Shirley Rouke walked over and shook hands with Colonel Tom Gaitskill.

"Colonel," he said earnestly, "if it had not been for your help I could never have gotten that picture. I thank you ten thousand times. Your suggestion

that I take the picture without the negroes knowing it by having some one in the know to lead 'em in their stunts was the real, right dope! By George! Pete and I stalked those darkies through the swamp just like we stalked the wild animals in the African jungle. We followed them everywhere!"

"I don't know one of those niggers in the picture," Sheriff Flournoy said. "Who is the bridegroom in the fake wedding?"

"He's the only good negro movie actor in the world!" Rouke informed him. "We employ him in our studio in New Orleans. He's gone back home now."

"What bothers me," Gaitskill said, "is that bride in the wedding ceremony, who takes the lead in the whole picture. That woman is not a nigger!"

"Well, *I guess not!*" Rouke exclaimed. "She's a Spanish Moor. She's the highest salaried movie actress in the Gitagraft Company and has acted in our pictures all around the world. In the North she was an Esquimau, in Montana she was an Indian princess, in Tokio she was a Geisha girl, in Hongkong she was the emperor's daughter, and in our South Sea Island picture she took a seventy-foot dive off of a mountain crag into the ocean. She can speak every language on earth, or if she can't she can fake it until a native would not know the diff——"

This dissertation was suddenly interrupted by a rich, sweet-toned, dramatic voice, speaking the technical word which in the moving picture world instructs the camera artist to stop action:

"Cut!"

The man whirled around and looked into the smiling face of Lalla Cordona.

She had slipped into the theater unobserved to witness the first try-out of the new picture.

She arose from her seat and advanced toward the men with all the grace and beauty of the Arabian princess that she was, garbed gloriously in the latest creations of Fifth Avenue modistes and milliners, a thing of dainty, exquisite, infatuating beauty and loveliness whose dark skin was as fine as spun silk, as delicate as cobweb, as glowing as polished ebony, and whose whole body flamed with the soul, the magnetism, the life of her.

As Rouke spoke her name introducing Colonel Gaitskill, she said:

"I beg everybody's pardon for my rude interruption. But it's deadly boresome to hear your own funeral encomium, don't you think?"

"I judge from the general ttnor of Mr. Rouke's remarks that anything you do is perfectly all right," Gaitskill laughed. Then he asked: "Where have you been stopping while in Tickfall, Miss Cordona?"

"I suppose the sheriff will put me under arrest," she answered with a throaty, chuckling laugh, "but I have been a cook in Mr. Flournoy's home in the last five days. In the South a black face indicates a nigger, and I knew that my only door of entrance to a white man's home was through the kitchen."

"Oh, Lord," Flournoy mourned, "I've lost the best cook in the whole world! Tom, I was going to invite you out for a meal to show her off——"

He was interrupted by the voice of a man sobbing.

The cry seemed to rack and tear the throat as if Pain had picked up the heart in red hot pincers holding the quivering flesh until it dropped the thick, black blood of agony.

They turned and saw Skeeter Butts slip out of the door of the little theater.

He had followed Lalla Cordona down the street, had entered the little theater unobserved, and had heard enough to know that all the blossoms of love in his heart had fruited into Dead Sea apples filled with ash and soot.

"Gawd!" he sighed pitifully, as he dragged his leaden feet toward the Hen-Scratch saloon, "I wish I wus a white man 'stead of a coon!"

D.D.

"It cain't be did, niggers," Skeeter Butts announced in a tone of finality, as he lighted a new cigarette on the stub of the old one. "Dis here chu'ch is a busted onfinancial institootion."

He leaned his hide-bottomed chair against the trunk of the chinaberry tree in the churchyard, tipped his derby hat forward until the brim was level with his eyes, and surveyed with disgust that dilapidated structure known as the Shoofly church.

"'Twon't cost much," the Rev. Vinegar Atts protested earnestly. "Dis chu'ch is been needin' dem improvements fer a long time."

"'Tain't so," Hitch Diamond growled. "You don't need no 'lectric readin' lamp to sot on yo' pulpit. You kin read by de light over yo' head."

"You ain't needin' no fancy pulpit chair to sot on, either," Skeeter Butts remarked.

"De springs is all busted outen de bottom of de one I'm got," Vinegar complained. "When I sot down I feels like I'm settin' in a bushel basket. My stomick is over on my knees an' my foots is mighty nigh up to my chin. De price ain't so powerful high —twenty dollars fer de settee an' five fer de readin' lamp. Dat don't seem much to me."

"Us'll git you dem fancy decoorshuns fer Christmus, Brudder Atts," Skeeter smiled. "Dis here is August——"

He stopped suddenly and peered down the road with great interest. A slim, black negro, dressy and citified, was picking his way along the dusty road toward the Shoofly church.

The three men adjusted their chairs so they could watch him as he came up the little hill. They noticed that he gazed down at the deep sand through gold-rimmed spectacles, that he picked places in the road which would not bury his shiny patent-leather shoes, that he exercised great care to protect his linen suit from flying particles of dust, and he carried a near-gold wrist-watch which he consulted frequently, as if he were bound to get up that hill on schedule time.

"I knows him," Skeeter Butts whispered. "I met his 'quaintance at de deppo dis mawnin'. He blowed in wid a long-whisker white man whut is visitin' de Revun Sentelle. Dis here new coon is callin' hisse'f Green Trapps."

Green sighed with relief when he reached the gate of the churchyard, and came across the lawn toward the three men with an ingratiating grin. Vinegar Atts kicked the chair on which his feet were resting toward the newcomer as an invitation to be seated.

"Mawnin', Greenie," Skeeter Butts greeted. "Us is been expectin' you to look up some of yo' own kin an' color."

He introduced Green to Vinegar and Hitch, passed him the cigarettes, and then waited for Green to open the conversation.

"You niggers ain't pregaged in no bizziness discussion, I hopes," Green remarked. "I don't hanker to butt in."

"'Tain't no secret bizzness," Skeeter replied. "Dis here Revun Atts craves a readin' lamp an' a pulpit chair fer his chu'ch, an' us members don't aspire to git him none."

Thereupon for the enlightenment of Green Trapps, the three men repeated all the conversation and arguments which had occupied them for an hour before Green arrived. At the conclusion of the talk-fest, Skeeter Butts demanded:

"What does you think about it, Greenie?"

"I agrees wid you-all," Green said promptly. "Vinegar needs dem great improvements, an' de Shoofly cain't affode to git 'em. Therefo' you-all oughter turn yo' minds to somepin mo' important."

He took off his gold spectacles, polished them carefully with a big silk handkerchief, then rubbed the shining face of his wrist-watch and finally flicked the corner of his handkerchief over his shiny shoes.

"I don't know nothin' more important," Vinegar Atts grumbled in manifest disappointment.

"As de revun pastor of de Shoofly is you got a D.D. degree?" Green asked blandly.

"Got a—which?" Vinegar asked, showing the whites of his eyes.

"Is you ever took on a kawlidge-gate degree?" Green repeated.

"I done tuck ten degrees in de Nights of Darkness Lodge," Vinegar replied. "I don't need no mo'. De las' one I tuck dey made me ballunce a raw egg

on my bald head an' a nigger hit it wid a paddle—ruint all my nice lodge clothes."

"Aw, shuckins! I don't mean dat," Green snorted in disgust. "Ain't you no Doctor of Dervinity? Don't de white folks call you de Revun Dr. Vinegar Atts? Ain't you no scholard like de Revun Dr. Sentelle an' dem yuther white preachers?"

"Naw, suh," Vinegar said regretfully. "Dis here pig ain't got no curl to his tail like you mentions."

"You had oughter git you a D.D.," Green said with conviction.

"De Elder needs a couple of D's," Hitch Diamond rumbled, delighted with the idea.

"De Revun Dr. Vinegar Atts, D.D. of Dervinity, pasture of de Shoofly Mefdis Chu'ch, Tickfall, Loozanny," Skeeter Butts vocalized, mouthing the words pompously. "Gosh! I'd gib a dollar to see de Elder dolled up like dat!"

"It'll cost fifty dollars," Green said quietly, looking at his wrist-watch as if he feared to miss an engagement. "I kin git one fer you fer dat many money."

Vinegar's face was glowing like a saint who had seen a heavenly vision.

"How come you is peddlin' dem D.D.'s aroun'?" he asked.

"I travels wid de Revun Dr. Gilbo, pres'dent of de Silliway Female Institoot," Green said easily. "Us come to town dis mawnin' to intervoo some rich folks in dis town. Us don't never run atter nobody's money, but we makes it a p'int to go whar money is at, an' we is powerful kind an' high perlite to de fellers whut is got money."

"Dat's right," Vinegar applauded.

"Now dis here Dr. Gilbo, he told me ef I could sell a couple of D.D.'s on dis trip to a couple deservin' nigger peachers, he wouldn't hab no objections. I got de papers wid me now."

He reached into his breast pocket and brought forth a crackling sheet of parchment. The three Tickfall negroes had never seen a college diploma. Had they been able to read this one they might have been enlightened; but unfortunately for them it was written in Latin. Its mystery conferred upon it a vast importance.

Green Trapps indicated a blank space with his finger.

"All I'm got to do is to write yo' name right dar, Revun," he said. "Atter dat I collecks my money, passes dis here obscribe over to you, an' de D.D. is did."

"Sounds easy," Vinegar said, his face aglow.

"Of co'se, niggers, dis here is white folks' bizzness an' us is got to speak it easy," Green said as he rolled his parchment and replaced it in his coat pocket. "Dar ain't many white kawlidges in dis worl' whut D.D.'s niggers."

He looked at his wrist-watch and rose to his feet.

"De Revun Dr. Gilbo takes two pills an' a charcoal tablet at 'leben o'clock, niggers," he announced. "I got to go wait on him."

"Hol' on, Greenie," Hitch Diamond rumbled. "Ef we wus ter be of a mind to bestow a D.D. on Vinegar, how soon could us git de goods?"

"Colleck yo' money up by to-night, an' us will

bestow de paper befo' de Shoofly cong'gation tomorrer night," Green suggested as he turned and walked away from the conference.

When Green had gone the three sat for a long time in perfect silence. Vinegar was longing and hoping for that little scrap of parchment, wondering how he could attain it. Skeeter was wishing in an indifferent way that Vinegar had an honorary degree, but he was determining in his own mind that he would purchase a pair of gold-rimmed spectacles just like Green's. At last Hitch Diamond spoke:

"Listen to dis idear, niggers: de Nights of Darkness Lodge meets to-night. I favors axin' all de members of de lodge to cont'ibute a few change to make up de fifty dollars an' buy Vinegar Atts a couple of D's."

"Dat's de trick, Hitchie," Skeeter shouted. "Of co'se, de lodge is secret work an' de white folks won't know nothin' about it. Dat comes up to de rules dat Green laid down."

"I think dat's a good notion," Hitch mumbled.

"I favors it," Skeeter agreed.

"Amen," said Vinegar Atts.

The session of the Nights of Darkness Lodge proceeded quietly until the question was asked: "Is there any new business?"

Thereupon Hitch Diamond, the grand exalted ruler, rose to his feet, cleared his throat, and spoke:

"Brudders, us cullud folks of Tickfall an' especial de members of dis lodge b'lieves in showin' high an' exalted salutes to people whut deserves it. I rises to

pernounce dat de time is now come to show a pertickler favor to our feller brudder member, Revun Vinegar Atts."

Vinegar arose, bowed, and sat down.

"De high exalted chaplain of dis lodge ain't as high as he might git, an' I aims to ax you-alls to put him whar he b'longs. We wants a preacher we kin be proud of, an' Vinegar Atts needs a couple of D.'s to finish him off complete. I moves dat we chip in an' buy 'em fer him."

"Thank 'e, suh," Vinegar arose and said, and sat down.

Hitch's speech was not as enlightening as it should have been, and it was met with complete silence. Each member was trying to think out what Hitch meant. After a while Skeeter Butts remarked:

"I favors buyin' a D.D. fer Vinegar, an' I now cont'ibutes one dollars to dat puppus."

Skeeter walked over to the altar in the middle of the lodge floor and dropped a resounding dollar upon the top. The negroes looked at the dollar with great curiosity, but they needed more light before they were willing to add any money to that contribution. After another silence, Figger Bush asked:

"Whut is dat one silver dollar fer, Skeeter?"

"To he'p buy a D.D.," Skeeter informed him.

"Whut am a D.D.?" Bush inquired.

"It's a—a—a kawlidge piece of paper wid writin' on it," Skeeter explained lamely.

"How much do she cost?" Bush persisted.

"Fifty dollars," Skeeter told him.

A murmur of protest ran around the room. No

one had the remotest idea what Skeeter was talking about, but they could all grasp the significance of fifty dollars. It was apparent that they would not favor buying anything for Vinegar Atts which cost that much money.

"I don't ketch on to dis here foolishness," Figger complained. "I don't gib none of my money fer somepin I ain't understood in my mind. I motions dat Vinegar Atts git up an' tell us whut he wants us to git him."

"Dar is a white man in town whut wants to make me a preachin' doctor," Vinegar explained. "De license cost fifty dollars an' some of my frien's an' lodge brudders wants me to git it."

"Whut does you aim to doctor—hosses?" Figger asked.

"Naw, suh, 'tain't no medicine doctor; it's a preachin' doctor I wants to be, like Dr. Sentelle."

"Huh!" Figger grunted and sank down into his seat. The mystery was too great for his feeble mind.

At that moment there was a loud knocking at the door. Then the outer guard reported:

"A stranger is outside—he ain't got no grip or password—wants to git inside."

"Whut mought his name be?" Hitch inquired.

"Green Trapps."

Hitch received this announcement with joy, for now he had some one who could explain the mystery.

"De lodge will be at rest," he announced. "Outer guard, admit Perfessor Green Trapps."

The lodge stood up and viewed this citified negro

You is come jes' in time, Pe
mond bellowed. "Us is got our
jam, an' we wants you to tell i
minds kin git clear."

"'Tain't hard to understan',
Trapps began, as he surveyed th
his gold-rimmed spectacles, an
benevolently. "De Silliway Fe
two hon'able degrees to bestow
preachers of de cullud race, an'
Atts is 'lected to git one. De f
make him a doctor fer fifty doll

"We don't want Vinegar made
Figger Bush squeaked.

"We don't make him no fem
explained patiently. "We mak
Doctor of Dervinity."

"Is you one of dem things yo
Curtain, a tall, yel gro, asked

"Naw, suh, I ain't preacher.

him sound dis way: De Revun Dr. Vinegar Atts, D.D. Is dat de notion?"

"Yes, suh," Green grinned. "Dat's a bird's-eye view!"

Pap ran his hand into his capacious pocket and brought forth a silver dollar. He dropped it with a loud thump beside Skeeter's money on the altar.

"I favors it, nigger. Less gib Vinegar all de frills!"

Hitch Diamond hastened to contribute his dollar, and Vinegar Atts followed him with two dollars.

"I's willing' to pay mo' dan anybody fer whut I gits fer myse'f," he announced happily.

Figger Bush walked forward and laid down fifty cents.

"I ain't no scholard, brudders," he said apologetically. "I don't see more'n four bits wuth of good dat I'll git outen dem D's."

One by one the members of the lodge advanced and contributed their bit to this honorary degree to be bestowed upon their chaplain. But silver dollars were scarce in the crowd, and fifty-cent pieces were soon exhausted and two-bit contributions were scanty and then dimes and nickels made up the rest of the pile.

"Ef eve'ybody is done his do, de inner guard will please count de remains," Hitch announced.

Figger Bush advanced and separated the silver in neat little piles. A minute later he announced the result:

"Twenty-five dollars!"

The lodge received this statement in gloomy si-

lence. Green Trapps sat down, took the college diploma out of his pocket and unrolled it. The sight of that precious document almost brought the tears to Vinegar's eyes.

It was a long time before a suggestion was offered, but finally Pap Curtain spoke:

"Brudders, I's powerful sorry dat we couldn't make de riffle an' fix Vinegar up right. But dese here is hard times fer niggers an' cash money is scarce. But I rejoices dat we is raised as much as we has. Now I makes dis motion: Vinegar is been bawlin' fer a readin' lamp an' a pulpit settee fer a long time. Less take dis cash money an' ease down Vinegar's feelin's a little by buyin' him de lamp an' de settee."

"Dat's de notion," a chorus of voices answered.

But Green Trapps, D.V., saw no reason why that money should be diverted from its original purpose. He sprang to his feet, waving the college diploma.

"I got a better notion dan dat, brudders," he exclaimed earnestly. "I figgers dat Vinegar wants dis here degree. Ain't dat so, Revun?"

"Dat's right," Vinegar murmured.

"Ef dat's de case, I makes you-all dis bizziness trade: de price of a D.D. is fifty dollars. Dis lodge has raised jes' half of dat money. Therefo' I moves you dat dis lodge bestow de Revun Vinegar Atts wid jes' one D!"

"Shore!" Figger Bush squeaked. "He oughter be satisfied wid one D."

"How would dat suit you, Revun?" Hitch Diamond asked.

"Dat'll suit fine," Vinegar smiled, his eager eyes

resting upon the parchment in Green's hand. "Ef I kin buy de doctor part of de double D, I's willin' to let de Dervinity part of it slide."

"Ever who favors bestowin' de Revun Vinegar Atts wid one D say aye!" Hitch Diamond howled.

"Aye!" the crowd bellowed.

"I thanks you-all fer yo' int'rust," Green Trapps announced quietly. "We will bestow de Revun Vinegar Atts wid one D at de Shoofly chu'ch tomorrer night."

All day long Vinegar Atts occupied himself by decorating the Shoofly church. He had festooned the building with arm-loads of long Spanish moss taken from the trees in the swamp. He had brought a wagon-load of ferns and palms and wild flowers from the fields and woods, and now as the shadows of the evening lengthened in the large, barnlike structure, he viewed the result with dissatisfaction.

"I needs dat settee an' readin' lamp to sot off dese here decorooshuns," he sighed, scratching his head in perplexity. "Atter I git my D, I got to go an' set down in a ole chair wid de bottom busted out, an' dat ain't doin' it up in de right sort of style."

He walked up and surveyed the offending chair, turned it over and looked underneath and uttered a disgusted grunt. He could make nothing out of it except what it was, a broken, dilapidated chair. Then a great idea entered his head.

"I bet de white folks is got plenty pulpit chairs an' readin' lamps dat dey don't need. I'll go out an' beg a few."

years neither church had had a
so that Dr. Sentelle and Vin
friends and workers in the Tick

Dr. Sentelle was a scholar, an
All that can be comprised in th
people, white and black, loved h
ation, will express what he was t

Vinegar Atts was a squatty, po
with long gorilla-like arms; he w
little tuft of hair over each ea
look like a moon-faced mule we
He was not a scholar, nor a cripp
some steel hooks in a five-hun
cotton and trot up the gangpla
singing a religious song and not st
on the top of his bald head by th

As for oratory, his colored fr
Vin ır was the prince of pla
H t the pertinacious guinea-f
v ıich could ˈ heard for t
ı stop to h chest tones
tre ı for fu al ıd evangel

rupt his conversation by requesting a favor. The stranger was old, white-haired, and his movements and the sound of his voice indicated that he was feeble. Vinegar did not know it, but he was looking at the Rev. Dr. Gilbo, president of the Silliway Female Institute.

"Dat white man is some sort broke-down preacher," Vinegar soliloquized, and he rattled the gate-latch loudly.

"All right, Vinegar, come in!" Dr. Sentelle called. "What do you want?"

"'Scuse me, white folks," Vinegar murmured, bowing apologetically to the stranger. "I come to ax Elder Sentelle could he he'p me outen a jam."

"Has the Shoofly outfit fired you?" Dr. Sentelle smiled.

"Naw, suh. Dey's gwine bestow special honors on me to-night," Vinegar chuckled, smoothing his stovepipe hat with a big handkerchief. "I done spent de day fixin' up de chu'ch wid flowers, an' now I needs two mo' things to gimme style. Is you white folks got a pulpit chair an' a 'lectric readin' lamp dat you ain't needin'?"

Dr. Sentelle appeared to give himself up to deep thought. In reality he was devoting himself to an internal enjoyment of that amusing request. Dr. Gilbo uttered a surprised chuckle which he promptly covered by a cough and hastily offered Vinegar a cigar.

"What sort of honor is going to be bestowed on you, Vinegar?" Dr. Sentelle asked.

"De Nights of Darkness Lodge is bought me a D," Vinegar told him.

The white men remained silent, praying for more light. Vinegar busied himself with his cigar, placing the gold band on his little finger and lighting the smoke.

"That's quite an honor," Dr. Sentelle ventured, wondering what he was talking about and hoping that Vinegar would say something to illumine the darkness.

"Yes, suh. Dey comes pretty tol'able expensive an' de lodge couldn't affode to buy but one," Vinegar replied, and a little note of disappointment was in his voice.

"That's too bad," Dr. Sentelle murmured sympathetically.

"De cost wus twenty-five dollars per each D," Vinegar sighed. "Of co'se dat's most too high fer niggers to pay, even jes' one. So I's mighty glad to git it."

"Are you alluding to some lodge degree, my man?" Dr. Gilbo asked.

"Naw, suh, it's a preacher degree. All de fust-class preachers has 'em. Of co'se, I would druther hab a D.D., but two of 'em costes fifty dollars."

With a gasp of astonishment the two men comprehended what Vinegar was talking about.

"Oh, I understand," Dr. Gilbo murmured. "You are receiving the honorary degree of Doctor of Divinity to-night."

"Yes, suh, dat's it. Only but I don't git but one D."

"May I inquire what college is honoring you?" Gilbo asked.

Vinegar's answer came very near being the end of Dr. Gilbo.

"De Silliway Female Institoot," Vinegar told him.

Then there was silence for the space of ten minutes. Vinegar stood as quietly as a mule hitched to a post. Dr. Sentelle's frail body was shaking with suppressed laughter. Dr. Gilbo felt that his reason was tottering on the crystal throne of intellect. At last Vinegar spoke:

"Could you lend me de loant of de pulpit chair an' de readin' lamp, elder?"

"No," Dr. Sentelle murmured chokingly, "I deeply regret that I cannot."

"Thank 'e, suh," Vinegar responded. "I knows you would ef you could. I reckin I better mosey on. I's shore much obleeged to dis here nice white man fer my seegar. Thank 'e, Kunnel."

Vinegar turned and walked as far as the gate, when Sentelle called to him.

"Vinegar, my friend and I would like to attend the meeting at the Shoofly church to-night."

Vinegar's stovepipe hat swept the ground and his grotesque body was distorted into an elaborate bow.

"My Lawd, white folks," he howled in delight. "Dis pore ole nigger won't ax de good Lawd fer no better blessin' dan to hab you-alls come out to de Shoofly. I'll hab a place on de flatforms fer bofe you-alls. De orgies begins at nine o'clock."

"That rascal, Green Trapps, is at the bottom of this," Dr. Gilbo said with conviction. "I am going

It was never any trouble
Shoofly church. All that wa
the bell and the colored po
church like doves to the w

But on this occasion all th
had hinted that there would
meeting on this particular nig
phone had carried the news, a
arrive from the swamps and p
dark. Some of the old women
seat, went trailing up to the ch
like a lot of old hens going to r

By nine o'clock there was
the church, nor a fence-post
building to which another ho
hitched.

After the congregation had
were almost exhausted, Hitch
to the platform and spoke:

"Brudders an' sisters—

tied all his pockets, as he laid a pile of silver on a little table beside the pulpit.

"I ain't spent none of it, brudders," he announced. "It's all right dar jes' like you gib it to me."

"Perfessor Green Trapps will now advance wid de obscribe!" Hitch commanded.

Thereupon, Green rose from a chair near the pulpit and walked to the little table. He took from his pocket a square of sheepskin, spread it out before him, and flattened it out by piling a handful of silver around the edges. Then he fitted his gold spectacles to his pop eyes, unscrewed the top of a fountain pen and sat down.

There was a slight commotion at the door, but Green did not notice it. There was a scrouging of people who stood in the aisle in order that two distinguished white men might pass, but Green Trapps did not notice that. Green looked up just as the two white men stood at the pulpit railing almost within reach of his hand. Then his startled eyes gazed down into the faces of Dr. Gilbo, president of the Silliway Female Institute, and Dr. Sentelle.

"Gawdlemighty!" Green gasped. He sprang from his chair and sent that piece of furniture whirling across the platform. With four gigantic leaps he covered the space between himself and the nearest window, and he went through that window, splashing the crowd out of his way in his exit like a brickbat dropped in a puddle of black mud.

The people were dazed by this sudden departure of Trapps, and they waited breathlessly for what might happen next. Dr. Gilbo strode upon the pul-

pit platform and stopped at the table where Green had been sitting. With a snort of indignation, he realized that his servant, Green Trapps, had stolen one of his college graduate diplomas, and was just about to fill it out with the name of Vinegar Atts.

Dr. Gilbo turned and addressed the audience:

"My colored friends, I regret to inform you that Green Trapps is a fraud and impostor, also a liar and a thief. He persuaded you to raise a sum of money to purchase from him an honorary degree from the Silliway Female Institute which he had no right or power to bestow. This college, of which I am president, does not grant honorary degrees, and if it did, we would not sell such an honor under any circumstances or at any price. I think you should congratulate yourselves upon my arrival just in time to thwart the nefarious designs of Green Trapps. He was endeavoring to secure money under false pretenses, and if I remain in my present state of righteous indignation, I shall have him prosecuted under the law."

Then Dr. Gilbo stalked off the platform and sat down.

"Beg parding, boss," Hitch Diamond mumbled. "Does I gather from dem remarks of yourn dat Brudder Vinegar Atts don't git no D?"

"He does not from the Silliway Female Institute," Dr. Gilbo answered.

"Dat's too bad," Hitch Diamond rumbled, scratching his head and wondering what to do next.

At this point, Skeeter Butts, who was sitting in the choir, rose and said:

"Brudder Hitchie, I moves dat de twenty-five dollars dat Green Trapps didn't git be give to Elder Vinegar Atts to buy a pulpit chair an' a 'lectric readin' lamp."

"I seconts dat motion," Pap Curtain snarled. "Dat'll let Vinegar down kinder easy an' won't hurt his feelin's so much."

When Hitch Diamond put the question, the motion was carried with a whoop and everybody was in a good humor again.

"Less sing our lodge song fer de closin' exercises, brudders," Hitch bellowed. "Eve'ybody sing!"

"Ef a smile we kin renew
As our journey we pursue,
Oh, de good we all may do
While de days is gwine by."

In this mighty chorus, Dr. Sentelle missed a voice that he loved—the superb baritone of Vinegar Atts. That voice, like the tones of a great pipe-organ, was the joy and pride of Tickfall. Now it was silent.

Dr. Sentelle turned and looked at Vinegar. The pastor of the Shoofly church sat huddled in a heap in his broken-bottomed pulpit chair, looking like a big, fat dumpling soaked in gravy. His simple, childish, baby face was puckered and drawn with sad lines until he looked like a big fat baby just tuning up to cry.

In fact, Vinegar was completely crushed. He had set his heart upon that meaningless piece of parchment and that sham degree, and the loss to him was

Oh, de worl' is full
Full of sad an' weep
He'p yo' fallen brud
While de days is g

Still Vinegar's superb voic
Sentelle felt a sense of loss an
music was not complete.

Then something happened
Tickfall, white and black, lov
to adoration.

Suddenly an idea burst lik
in the scholar's brain, and br
kindly and gracious service. I
ing his frail body heavily upon
support, and held up a thin,
hand for silence. The singing

"My friends," he began in
sweet and musical that every
"for over thirty years your pas
I have been the only preacher
I have spent many an hour i

people and any kind of harm, and it pleases me tonight that I have been instrumental in preventing you from paying something for nothing—absolutely nothing!"

"Thank 'e, suh!" several voices spoke.

"Nevertheless, I believe that Vinegar Atts very richly deserves the one D which you in your kindness were trying to purchase for him."

"Hear dat, now!"

"The word 'doctor' is an academic title, originally meaning a man so well versed in his department as to be qualified to teach it. I knew Vinegar Atts years ago as a prize-fighter, and I have seen him fight; and I assure you that in the department of pugilistic activity, Vinegar is well enough versed in the manly art of self-defense to know how to teach it!"

"Now you done said a plum' mouthful!" Hitch Diamond, the Tickfall Tiger, howled. "Elder Atts teached me all *I* know 'bout fightin'!"

"Thirty years have passed since Vinegar became the pastor of the Shoofly church. In that time, negro preachers have come and gone through the other negro churches in this parish like a Mardi Gras procession, but Vinegar holds on to his job. It is my conviction that a man so endowed with the gift of continuance possesses the supreme art of pleasing all the people all the time, and should be qualified to teach that art to others."

"Listen to dat white man!" a chorus of voices mumbled in admiration.

"I therefore believe that Vinegar Atts richly deserves the title of doctor, and I therefore greet him

...ing up in m
his backbone as stiff as if h
Dr. Sentelle walked over
Vinegar sprang up with a
fragile white hand in his go

There was a shout from
nearly lifted the roof off th

Then Dr. Gilbo was s
action. He sprang up fro
his hat on the floor. He je
of his pockets, seeking for
eagerness he spilled someth

Suddenly he found what h
—a little square box, such a
the top from the box, he b
medal about the size of a po
as thin.

"My colored friends," D
shrill, high voice. "This
behold is bestowed upon the
Silliway Female Institute as a
graduating exercises last Ju

the whoop of adulation which sprang from the throats of that delighted audience.

Vinegar Atts sat down and wiped the tears from his eyes upon his coat sleeve.

"Us would like to hear a speech from de Revun Dr. Vinegar Atts!" Hitch Diamond bellowed.

The prince of platform spellbinders stood up and made a speech of two words, but in the intonation of those two words he comprised all that a negro can express of eloquent gratitude:

"Bless Gawd!"

He sat down for the last time in his broken pulpit chair, and his powerful shoulders quivered with emotion. The next day he put a new chair in its place, adorned his pulpit with an electric reading lamp, and recovered his gift of gab.

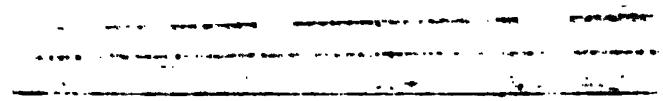
"Lodge brudders, attention!" Hitch Diamond bellowed. "Give de good-night salute an' sing de last verse!"

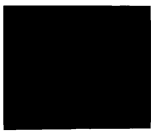
The men folded their hands over their breasts and their superb voices chanted:

"But de deeds of good we sow
Bofe in shade an' shine will grow,
An' will keep our hearts aglow,
While de days is gwine by."

Dr. Sentelle listened and smiled. The music was complete.

He reflected that he had never heard Dr. Vinegar Atts sing so well.





The Untamed

By

Max Brand

A tale of the West, a story of the Wild; of three strange comrades,—Whistling Dan of the untamed soul, within whose mild eyes there lurks the baleful yellow glare of beast anger; of the mighty black stallion Satan, King of the Ranges, and the wolf devil dog, to whom their master's word is the only law,—and of the Girl.

How Jim Silent, the "long-rider" and outlaw, declared feud with Dan, how of his right-hand men one strove for the Girl, one for the horse, and one to "'get' that black devil of a dog," and their desperate efforts to achieve their ends, form but part of the stirring action.

A tale of the West, yes—but a most unusual one, touched with an almost weird poetic fancy from the very first page, when over the sandy wastes sounds the clear sweet whistling of Pan of the desert, to the very last paragraph when the reader, too, hears the cry and the call of the wild geese flying south.

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Rachel Swete M

Author of "Fringe of the Desert,"
and "Drifting W

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fr t eir meeting—and the
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cinating characters in this ch
And the Man and the Girl f
happiness awaiting them—in
at the end of the road.

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